

Prince of the Courts

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Summary: It's been 25 years since the Cold Peace was signed at the conclusion of the Dark War, and seeds planted long ago are coming to fruition as two new half-Shadowhunters find each other and start on a journey that will take them through the Faerie Courts, the Mundane world, and Downworld you've never seen... See the consequences of the Dark War and the ripples it caused with the Fey.

1. Prologue

1

Prologue

Autumn, 2028

With one final shove, Sera pushed her mother's funeral ship into the cold waters of lake, sending gentle ripples ahead of it to herald her passing into the afterlife. She picked up her bow from where it lay against her pack and pulled out a lighter, sparking a flame to light the arrow that was waiting for one last flight. It was easy for Sera to make the shot, in more ways than one.

The arrow thudded into the bundle of kindling, igniting the carefully-made pile and spreading to the rest of the tiny vessel. It was an old canoe in truth, but it would serve for her mother. Shadowhunters were burned when they died, and whatever else her mother had done, she had been a Shadowhunter.

She watched the canoe drift out farther into the lake, and the wind blowing down from the north was cold as she inhaled. An early blast of winter had come to strip the Muskoka Lakes of their autumn beauty; a thin layer of snow had already covered the ground and would soon bury the land around her tiny cottage. Her breath fogged the air as she exhaled. Everything matched what she had seen in her dream. She had been waiting for this day for nearly a year.

Turning away from the lake, Sera walked back up the embankment toward the cottage. It was time to close it up for good and get moving. No time to waste.

It was easy to pack; she'd never had much out here in the isolated cottage where she had been born and raised. Never allowed to stray far from the lake, her mother had been desperate to keep her hidden from the Clave, from Downworlders, from everything for the last 17 years. Her training had been lonely, but hard; her mother had seen to that. But her mother couldn't protect her from the dreams, and Sera had long-since learned to stop sharing them with her.

While awake, Sera's heart had been chained to this lake and her mother, but it was the hours she spent dreaming that she truly lived for. Her father's blood had given her that much, at least.

A small bundle of food joined what little she had already shoved into her pack and her hands passed by the hand-carved gifts from her mother, and her own childish crafts made years ago. None of it mattered anymore. This part of her life was ending, and she wasn't going to need it where she was going.

She knelt down and pried a stone free from the edge of the hearth, reaching into the space behind it to pull out the last of her family's precious heirlooms. Glittering sapphires and shining diamonds sparkled up at her, and matching earrings followed the necklace into her pack. It would be enough to get her started. That was all she needed. A good start.

She rose, brushing the ashes from the hearth off her jeans. There were still hours of daylight left to get to the highway and catch her ride into town.

As she took one last look at the tiny interior of the cottage, she caught a flash of a vision â€“ her mother's stele, tucked away in the bedside table drawer.

Sera shook her head, willing the vision to jump further and show her why, to give her a reason to take this piece of her mother's life with her. Nothing more came. She sighed and crossed the room to her mother's bedroom. These flashes were so seldom wrong. She slipped the stele into the side pocket of the pack. Just in case, she thought. Although why she would need a stele, of all people, was beyond her.

The door closed tightly behind her but she didn't lock it; there was no lock. Maybe someone would need a safe place to stay someday and find this abandoned cottage. Maybe animals would manage to push their way in and live like kings. The only thing that was certain was that she wasn't coming back. Not ever.

The trees welcomed her as she passed from the clearing into the protection of their boughs. Aged trunks slid by and great branches dipped overhead, escorting her away from everything she had known in her waking life, silent sentinels that had watched her grow up amongst them. Her dreams had shown her so much, but she still knew so little of what was needed. As she walked, she let her mind drift back to where it always went, to the first dream that had set her on this path, to him.

_Sera had been 11 the first time she dreamed of him. It had been among the first of her dreams that felt _different_. These ones were special. Sometimes they held hints of what the future could be, sometimes they felt so strongly of the present that Sera was certain that they were really happening at that moment, and sometimes they took on a faded quality that made them feel like things that had already happened._

This dream was strong, and its sense of immediacy was overwhelming. This was happening. This was real.

_Great, dark trees rose all around her, high into the night sky, exaggerated by dream sense, as things often are. They ringed an expansive clearing where glimmering Faerie lights floated in the air, unsupported, twinkling with a lazy grace. Starlight shone down on the clearing, adding to the ethereal illumination. _

The dream flashed, and now the space was filled with beautiful and terrible creatures, creatures she never could have imagined. Slender bodies in every imaginable hue, some winged, some horned, others even more exotic. Flowing hair shimmered in wild colours, and jarred the eye with incongruous glimpses of chitin and claws. Feral eyes flashed above perfect smiles, and delicate limbs sometimes ended in talons or hooves. She couldn't hear the music, but she knew it was there and could feel it thrumming through her chest, pulling at her heart without being able to hear a single note. She could see some of the Fey farther back in the trees, dancing and twisting in the night, helplessly ensnared by the music and throwing away every thought except of dancing more in their lust for pleasure.

Wings fluttered impatiently and antlers twisted around as heads turned to see what was happening at the far end of the clearing. Sera slipped closer in her dream, sliding through the crowd of achingly beautiful monsters. She drifted through the last bit of spectators and could at last see what was drawing their attention.

A great throne of twisted oak rose from the earth, clearly not an original part of the clearing. Gnarled limbs extended from the back, twisting upward almost painfully, cursed to never again know the clean lines their limbs once bore proudly. Upon the throne was a Faerie woman of surpassing beauty, her elaborately-styled red tresses so lush even in a dream that Sera ached to reach out and touch them. She was gowned in diaphanous gold, the folds clinging where they should and flowing gracefully everywhere else. A crown was just visible in her hairstyle, and Sera surmised that this must be the Seelie Queen she had heard of during her mother's lectures.

The silent music humming through her chest faded and the Seelie Queen rose from her throne with grace that spoke of a thousand years of addressing her subjects. Her ice-blue eyes pierced the assembled crowd and Sera could feel the weight of that gaze as it swept by her, the power that radiated from a Queen of Faerie. Rosebud lips parted and the Queen spoke,

"_Welcome, my faithful and loyal subjects. The Seelie Court makes free with its food and drink this night, that you may revel and take pleasure in it and from each other," she paused as the crowd cheered and raised glasses filled with every colour of drink Sera could imagine, and a few she couldn't._

"_Even now, the Nephilim and their Downworld allies celebrate the renewal of their Accords in the City of Glass, without the Fair Folk." The crowd hissed at this, and the Queen raised her hands to stay their anger._

"_The Nephilim children do not understand that we, the most powerful and oldest of Races, care nothing for their human laws. If they think to grind us under their heels, they will learn to their woe that we were here long before their kind, and will live on long after they are wiped from this earth."_

_The gathered Faeries stamped loudly with ill-assorted feet and hooves, cheering wildly and Sera could feel the blood-lust growing in the crowd, that feeling that comes from being on the very precipice of becoming a mob. _

"_The Shadowhunters think they have the power to strip us of our weapons and deny our legendary warriors their right to bear arms. I laugh in the face of this order. Let our warriors come forth now to entertain us with their skill and valour!" The Seelie Queen clapped her hands together twice and a gap opened behind and to the side of her throne._

_Two-dozen Faerie knights, armed and armoured in splendour marched forward. Great, antlered helms, white chain-link mail, even a crusted bark-like armour streamed past the twisted throne until they stood before their Queen and knelt as one. Sera could see that many of them had the slimmer and smaller forms of females under beautiful armour, delicate hands braced on hilts or fingering blades strapped to thighs. _

One, at the far end, was smaller than the rest and wore a double-bladed staff across their back. The blades were wickedly curved at the ends, and the weapon looked almost too large for the Faerie knight. Light-weight black leather armour covered the Faerie from head to toe, including a mask that covered their face from the eyes down. A shock of ice-white hair spilled down, nearly shoulder-length, slightly pointed ears just visible. The knight's gaze was riveted on the Seelie Queen, and Sera moved even closer to the gnarled throne to get a closer look. Something about this particular knight drew her in, and she crossed in front of the throne.

The knight's eyes snapped to Sera, looking right at her for just an instant. Eyes of the deepest emerald fixed Sera in place, holding her captive as surely as chains. This wasn't possible. It was a dream. No one could see her. A hint on confusion darkened the knight's expression and Sera used the distraction to wrench herself away, vanishing from where she stood in front of the throne. She found herself back in the crowd, just another spectator again.

The dream flashed again, and now the leather-clad Faerie knight was in the centre of the clearing, a make-shift arena, and the double-bladed staff was gripped in gloved hands. Sera had been wrong earlier; it wasn't too big. It fit every line of the knight perfectly, and she knew that it would be wielded with deadly grace.

_The ground within the arena boundaries was rough and torn up. Many matches must have been fought already, but if Sera was seeing this

one, it must be important._

There was a stirring at the eastern end of the clearing and Sera moved closer to hear what was being said. A massive man with eyes of two different colours was holding a horned helmet under one arm and was gripping the shoulder of another Faerie with his other hand. A long blade of hammered metal hung at the large Faerie's waist, black and twisted like it had been burned over and over again. The Faerie he held had nearly black hair with a sheen of blue and green shot through, almost as if it couldn't decide what colour to settle on. His eyes were two different colours as well, but both black and silver burned with equal intensity. He shook free of the other's grip and sneered.

"_I will pay whatever blood-price the Queen has set to do battle with her whelp, Gwyn._"

The larger Faerie shook his head slowly, sadly. "Let the past stay in the past, Kieran. The mortal world has seen many years pass since that day; let your heart see them pass as well."

Kieran's face twisted for a moment. "You cannot understand. I will do this thing, and then my heart will allow some of the pain to bleed away. Give me leave to fight, that I might find peace."

Gwyn settled back a bit within his great cloak, seeming to take the measure of the other Faerie as if weighing his heart in those massive hands.

Gwyn tilted his head and said, "You would fight to find peace, Hunter? You are still so young," He shook his head, and for a moment, Kieran's face fell. "Do what you must."

A dark light seemed to fall across Kieran's face as Gwyn melted back into the crowd of fierce Faerie faces around him, the wildness of Faerie chillingly palpable to Sera, even through the dream. These Faeries, these Hunters, were different from the rest. Kieran bounded forward into the arena to stand across from the leather-clad Faerie knight who still stood waiting, staff in hand.

The Seelie Queen rose from her throne once more, her face alive with a wild pleasure at the two combatants in the arena. Her voice soared over the crowd,

"_My lord Gwyn of the Hunt! You honour us by allowing one of your Hunters to join in our little games! How delightful!" She clapped her hands once more and settled back to watch, anticipation lighting up the beautiful lines of her curving smile._

In the arena, Kieran pulled battered white gauntlets from his belt and pulled them on slowly, fingers easing into familiar material now worn from a thousand battles. He flexed his hands and looked at them intently for a moment, lost in memories that Sera couldn't imagine.

The Hunter's hands flashed too quickly for Sera's eyes to follow and a blade whipped out of its sheath at his waist, arcing for the knight in a silver flicker, and she was certain it was over before it could even begin.

The knight vanished, faint wisps of black smoke curling in the air where he had stood. Before Sera could even begin to process it, he had reappeared behind the Hunter, staff sweeping up to strike at his unprotected back. The Hunter was caught completely off guard and off balance, nearly stumbling through the empty space where his opponent should have been standing.

_The knight's staff sliced across the Hunter's back, leaving a shallow slash through armour and flesh alike. The Hunter spun around with lightning speed, darting back for another strike and was parried by the knight, staff whirling, deadly blades flashing in the Faerie light. _

The spectators were drunk with their intoxicating delights, enchanted by their own food, and were screaming with blood-lust as the two combatants met again in a clash of steel. The knight feinted and struck and parried, pushing the Hunter back on his heels, and Sera could see the intense focus locked in those green eyes.

The Hunter snarled, a second blade appearing in his left hand, and now they wove a deadly dance between them, staff spinning deftly in black gloves, sword and dagger in white gauntlets. The Hunter pressed back, slashing and darting, maddened by his opponent in a way that Sera couldn't understand.

_Seconds ticked by and all of the jeers from the crowd, the still-inaudible music, and even the sharp shearing noises coming from the blades began to fade away until Sera was watching the fight in nearly silent slow-motion. _

_In moves that would have been too fast for her to see if the dream had not slowed, Sera saw the Hunter's dagger snake past the blurred staff, aiming for the knight's heart. The second stretched and Sera's breath caught in her throat, her own heartbeat slowed to a single hard pulse as the knight vanished again, now behind the Hunter, hand closed over the dagger hilt as it drove toward where it would have pierced flesh. _

The dream snapped back to regular speed and suddenly the Hunter was on his back on the ground, thrown down by the knight taking advantage of the forward momentum. The knight still held the dagger and in the second that it took the Hunter to comprehend what had just happened, the dagger pierced the Hunter's left hand, pinning him to the ground.

_The Hunter screamed in pain and the knight stepped back, the fight concluded. _

The knight retreated a few more paces and knelt, facing the Seelie Queen once more, and raised the staff in salute, offering the honour of the victory to her. Her eyes blazed and she couldn't contain the satisfaction that curled up the edges of her smile. She fixed her eyes on the knight and nodded once in approval, accepting the victory as her own.

_The Hunter, forgotten on the torn ground, wrenched his own dagger from his left hand and dropped it into the dirt as he rose to his knees, chest heaving, his lips frozen in a rictus of pain and rage at the humiliation he was consumed by. A touch of madness had a hold of his mind, dulling the pain in his hand and back. He launched himself

at the knight, clawing and grasping at the leather armour._

The knight turned in shock at the unexpected attack. The Hunter tore at the armour, crazed, and hissed at the knight, "You are not a Shadowhunter." The knight grappled with the Hunter, still confused. The Hunter ripped away an arm guard and reached back in for more, still tearing away at anything he could get a grip on.

"_You are not a Shadowhunter!" The Hunter screamed at the knight, pulling away the mask that had protected the lower half of the knight's face._

Massive arms encircled the Hunter, trapping him, and Gwyn lifted Kieran away from the knight. Kicking and struggling, the Hunter was pulled backwards by Gwyn, his face now streaked with tears that smeared through the dust kicked up by the fight, the pain in his eyes bleeding through the anger. The Hunter shouted one last time as he was carried away, "You are not a Shadowhunter!"

Sera's heart was racing as she looked back at the knight, still kneeling in the dirt, armour torn away in places. She had misjudged earlier; she thought the knight had been a female because of their small stature. But she was looking a boy, barely older than her perhaps, though it was always hard to tell with Faeries. She could just see the edge of one of the Angel's runes on his forearm. He was watching Gwyn carry away the maddened Hunter, a look of hurt etched on his face. He looked back at the Seelie Queen for direction, uncertainty clear in his eyes.

She beckoned him to kneel at her feet. When he had done so, she stood and gently stroked the side of his face. "You did well, my son."

Sera cursed under her breath as her foot turned on a rock hidden by the snow. Hours of walking in the cold had not improved her mood.

The first dream had been burned into her memory for the last six years. There had been others, of course, so many others, but that one always stood foremost. The other, from last winter, had been much darker. It had had the feeling that always came when tendrils of the future twisted back through time to tease at her dreams. She had seen him. Seen him hunted. Seen him squared against his mother's enemies, and his father's. She'd seen him win. She'd seen him lose. She'd seen him die.

But there was still time to fix it. _The future isn't set until it becomes the present, and by then it's already in the past, _she thought to herself as she trudged through the forest toward the road where a silver car would be kind enough to stop and give her a ride into town. That darker dream had absolutely resonated with a sense of time, telling her when it would come to pass. Warning her how long she had left to change it.

The road appeared ahead of her and she scrambled up from the deep ditch and started walking south along the shoulder. Her breath puffed out as twilight started to fall, the chill already settled into her hands and feet from the long walk. She thought about her mother's funeral pyre slipping under the water of the lake where they had lived out her mother's exile. She thought about her father, whom she

had never known, but had caught glimpses of in dreams of the past. She thought about how much work it was going to be to get ready for what was coming. But most of all, she thought about _him._

Sera turned around and peered down the road, searching for headlights. Light bloomed from around a bend and she flung out her right arm, thumb up, walking backwards and huffed a few more clouds of breath as she waited.

A silver Honda slowed and then stopped just past her and she jogged over, hitching her pack to one shoulder, ready to sling it into the trunk. The passenger-side window whirred down and the driver called out to her, "You need some help?"

More than you know, she thought.

The trunk popped open and Sera tossed what was left of her old life inside, then climbed into the passenger seat. She nodded when the driver asked if she wanted a lift into town, and she thanked him.

She leaned her temple against the window and watched as the lakes and forests were blanketed over by darkness, erasing everything except the bit of road that she could still see in the headlights. _Seems about right_, she thought to herself.

Her eyes started to close, and the last thought she held on to was the one that had driven her every day for nearly a year.

I have five years left to get ready. I have five years left to figure out how to save him.

2. Chapter 1

**1**

September 2008

The Queen of the Seelie Court screamed in agony one last time, her hands clenched around a bloody sheet. She took in a shaky breath and looked to where her handmaiden, Kaelie Whitewillow, was now holding a healthy child smeared with her blood.

"It's a male," she said softly, wiping away some of the mess and moving to the basin to begin washing him clean.

The Seelie Queen nodded absently, already lost in her thoughts about the new life she had created. She had bedded Sebastian Morgenstern for selfish reasons in those final days before the turn of the new year, before the Cold Peace, taking a mortal lover because it had pleased her to find a Shadowhunter with such an agreeable temperament. Shadowhunters had always held a particular fascination for her, with their shared Heavenly ancestry. But Sebastian Morgenstern had had one thing more — a touch of Greater Demon blood. He had been an entirely unique creature, and quite exciting in their pleasures. Now she had mixed that unusual blood with her own and taken Valentine Morgenstern's experiment farther than he could have ever imagined.

She looked around her birthing bed, glossing over the handmaidens and looked to her daughters who had chosen to attend the birth of their half-brother. Perhaps she could entice one of them to raise the child; a Queen could not be seen caring for an infant. Especially not a half-Shadowhunter, not with the political current in this state. She would turn this child into an advantage â€“ all that remained was determining how.

"My daughters. Your new brother is unlike anything this world has ever seen. Who among you will accept the honour of caring for him as he learns his place in our Court?" The Queen waited.

A tall, lithe figure stepped away from one of the walls where wildflowers bloomed between the cracks and tree roots trailed down from the ceiling. She tossed back long hair the colour of chocolate, her eyebrows arched imperiously and her upper lip curled in disdain.

"'E iz an embarrassment to zis Court, muzzer. Better to kill 'im at once and display ze body for zose 'oo wish to see you lose your throne for what 'appened with ze Cold Peace." AlvarilÃ©a had spent much of her time enjoying her pleasures with the Mundanes of Paris, and had made no secret of her hatred for the Faerie's reduced status in the world.

Her dark eyes flashed as they fixed on the oddly-silent baby in Kaelie's arms, "I came 'ere today to see 'im born dead, but it iz clearer zat I will be disappointed. I will 'ave no part of 'im." She turned sharply to stalk out of the room and the delicate curtain threaded through with tiny charms and bells tinkled softly as she left.

Inwardly, the Seelie Queen seethed. There were too many in the Court who had been rumbling about what the Cold Peace had done to the Fey. They were all too young to understand, as she did, that this was only temporary. The Shadowhunters would soon see their error in cutting away the strongest of the Downworlders. They would come begging on their knees soon enough, and she had a mind to have the path strewn with broken glass. She had held the Seelie Throne for more centuries than she cared to count, and she wasn't going to be brought low by these children.

"I will take him, mother." Another of her daughters had stepped forward. Lilac-coloured hair drifted to her waist in lazy, spiralling tresses much like her mother's. Her skin was pale, brushed in places with the softest of purples, and even her eyes were violet-hued. Gossamer wings flitted nervously as she met her mother's eyes, and then looked away from her iron gaze immediately. Arynessa.

A flicker of unease passed through the Queen while she considered the offer. Her eyes bored into her daughter's face as she called on a sliver of her power to force Arynessa to meet the enquiring stare. Clear, blue eyes did silent battle with violet. Holding her daughter's attention, she rifled quickly through the thoughts that were fluttering like trapped moths as a flame approached. One was stronger than the rest. Arynessa, holding an infant boy, with a girl-child of barely two Mortal years clutching at her leg. Each bore the tell-tale, slightly pointed ears of those who had a touch of the Fey. The Queen could feel the longing pouring across the link between them. The silence stretched between the two and some of her other

daughters and the handmaidens shifted uncomfortably. The power in the room was perceptible even to them.

"Very well, Arynessa. He will be yours to rear. I will ensure that your brother Baelerithon is present as well, to see that he learns Courtly manners and the history of our people. Between the two of you, I expect you to produce something extraordinary with the breeding I am giving you to work with." She paused, drawing on her power again to drape a layer of menace over the room. Arynessa shivered as it laid across her. "Failure would be most unpleasant, daughter."

Arynessa bowed her head. "Thank you, mother."

The Queen flicked a hand at Kaelie, beckoning her to bring the infant closer now that he was clean. He was still quiet, moving gently within his swaddling. She looked upon his face and was surprised to see eyes of the deepest green looking back at her quizzically. A matte of wispy white hair was visible, and the Queen nodded to herself, pleased with his colouring. Rather a great deal of his father, it would seem. She wondered at how much of herself would be reflected in his soul if so little showed on his face. Interesting, indeed.

The Queen was reminded of another Shadowhunter, fair to look upon and pleasing in his speech. A smile twisted her lips as she considered her newest son.

"Let the child be called Rayce, and let him bear the name of the Morning Star like his father before him," she proclaimed. "The Morgensterns have been nothing if not entertaining to watch. So, too, shall this one be."

The Seelie Queen waved the infant away and Kaelie moved to place the bundle in Arynessa's arms. The princess fixed a rapturous, hungry gaze on the child as she took him from the handmaiden. The Seelie Queen moved to stand and she dismissed her waiting daughters. Her handmaidens moved in to attend to her as the others filed out of the chamber.

That was when the Queen first heard Rayce Morgenstern begin to cry.

July, 2012

"Rayce, you must be very silent and very attentive today. Mother will not be pleased if you are unruly. Do you understand?" Arynessa crouched down in front of the child and held his chin in her left hand. His green eyes met her purple stare and she repeated her question.

"Yesth, sithster." His face split into a mischievous grin and he lunged forward impulsively to hug her. She rocked back on her heels and brought her arms up hesitantly. It still surprised her after nearly four years that he could trust so freely and love so easily. She ran her fingers through his messy mop of soft, white hair, tracing the slight point to his ears. He really had become quite a beautiful child.

She stood and took his hand, leading him away from the cloistered set

of rooms that served as their home in the Seelie Court. A great room served as the entryway, high-ceilinged and wide to accommodate the training he would soon begin. Flowing lines in the sandalwood walls brightened what could have been a gloomy space. Hanging Faerie lights dangled from the high ceiling and were spaced along the walls, their glow easy to dim or brighten with a thought.

Off the left side of the great room ran a hallway that gave access to four bedrooms and a place to wash. The largest bedroom was hers, the smallest belonged to Rayce. The other two were unoccupied, as of yet, though Arynessa expected that to change in the near-future. Off the right side of the great room was a small area to prepare and share meals, and a study where Baelerithon dutifully gave Rayce his lessons. A small space to live in exile, but Arynessa found herself unexpectedly happy with the life she was creating here.

She pulled the door closed behind her and touched her hand to a darker patch of wood next to the knob. Roots from around the door twisted inward, joining smoothly around the seams, and the apartments were effectively locked away. She frowned at the reminder that the seemingly happy life she had was not necessarily something that others among the Fey were happy about.

Will-o-the-wisp lamps brightened in the tunnels as Arynessa and Rayce approached, and darkened as they passed, leaving them in a moving sphere of light. These passages were rarely used, and the Seelie Queen had given them a space far from the throne room to deter any mischief. There had been a few incidents in the beginning, until her mother had drawn out the agony of the last perpetrator's suffering for several mortal weeks. Arynessa already knew that her mother was a master of those arts.

Rayce was scurrying along at her side to keep up with her longer strides, humming a Faerie ballad to himself. Her eyebrows furrowed. Again, he surprised her. She had been humming to herself while washing up after their meal last night; he must have been listening without her knowing he was there.

Soon, they reached the busier tunnels near the throne room and Arynessa slowed, not wishing to be seen hurrying to wait in attendance on her mother. Today's meeting had the potential to be important for the future of the Courts, and the Queen had wanted as many of her children and courtiers around her as possible as a show of strength, but Arynessa wasn't interested in playing the role of lapdog. Looking after Rayce until he came of age would take only a few of her endless years, and she didn't want to return to the Court demeaned in any way. She had always enjoyed a position of strength.

She brushed aside a shimmering curtain of trailing moss that gave off a gentle glow of the worms nestled within. Arynessa stopped and looked closer. They were alive and in good health. She made a thoughtful noise in the back of her throat. Her mother must be in a very good mood.

Inside the throne room, that good mood was even more clearly in evidence. A carpet of soft, rolling moss covered the ground, rising gently to where the Queen's throne sat on a small atoll. Today, her throne was cut from glittering crystal that sparkled from the tightly-clustered Faerie lights above, almost an imitation of sitting

in a ray of sunshine. The chamber walls were loosely-spaced trunks of trees, through which the illusion of distance had been created with a glamour, giving the throne room the appearance of a vast, open space. Butterflies flitted around flowers that rose from the moss and doves roosted in some of the boughs above.

A great expanse of mirror was suspended in the air below the atoll at a short distance, affording an impressive view of the chamber's current styling. Arynessa settled herself and Rayce in the moss near the foot of the atoll, far enough way from the throne that he would not be easily seen, but close enough that others would see where she sat. The darkened mirror was close; they would have a good view.

Soft murmuring filled the chamber and Arynessa listened with only half an ear. Scrying with the King of the Unseelie Court was not common, but she had been a princess of the Court long enough for the novelty to have worn off a bit. It was far more important for her to observe those gathered, and more importantly, those who had chosen not to come.

As her eyes played over the courtiers, she picked out many of her siblings among them, chatting easily. Her eyes narrowed. Were they solidifying support for her mother, or fostering dissension? She almost wished she hadn't chosen to ensconce herself so quickly. Perhaps it would have been advantageous to filter through the room; a shoulder touched here, a slight nod of her head there... But no. She looked behind her to where Rayce was sprawled on his back in the moss, arms and legs flung out carelessly.

Rayce was staring up at the Faerie lights above and the hovering butterflies, entranced. He had never been permitted to leave their apartments before. A butterfly floated closer and he raised his hand to it, offering a perch. It alighted gently on the back of his hand and he froze, staring intently at the pattern of its wings, memorizing the shape of them.

The butt of an elaborately carved wooden staff slammed down at the entrance to the chamber to the left side of the throne, startling the butterfly from Rayce's hand. He sat up and twisted around, but couldn't see past the assembled guests.

A dozen Faerie knights in two columns marched sedately into the throne room and stopped. They turned to face each other and then stepped back as one, opening an aisle between them, and drew their swords in a synchronized motion to hold them outstretched overhead, the points of one column meeting those of the other.

The Queen of the Seelie Court entered then, and Arynessa held back a gasp of wonder. Folds of gossamer silver wrapped around her mother's body, shot through with bursts of platinum, and jewels dazzled at her throat. Her red locks had been bound up in silver threads that dangled diamonds haphazardly throughout the arrangement and sparkled off the Seelie crown.

Arynessa had not seen her mother arrayed so brilliantly in some time; the wealth of the Court had dwindled miserably as the Fey had been obligated to pay for the restoration of Alicante and many of the Institutes attacked by Sebastian Morgenstern.

The Seelie Queen mounted her crystal throne and sat back delicately, hands lightly caressing the edges of the armrests. She nodded to two of the Fey kneeling at either edge of the scrying mirror. On her command, they each touched a bottom corner of the glass and it came to life slowly, revealing the Unseelie Court on the other side.

Whereas the Seelie Queen had expended great effort to create a beautiful throne room for the reception, it was clear that the King of the Unseelie Court had gone to no such trouble. The scrying mirror seemed to strain trying to reflect enough light from its gloomy image. A dark cavern stretched out from the mirror, and a rough throne of unworked stone rose from the floor as if it were a single piece. A few licks of blue flame flickered unsupported around the throne, illuminating a little of its surroundings. Dark shadows gathered behind the throne; Unseelie courtiers.

The Unseelie King stepped into view, the throne many paces behind him, and he seemed larger than life to those watching from the Seelie Court. Dark hair rippled to his shoulders, bound by an ancient bronze crown. His black eyes seemed to draw in the darkness of the cavern around him, feeding on the black emptiness. The Queen fixed her gaze on him and opened her arms wide in a welcoming gesture.

"My Lord, today is an auspicious day for our people. The Nephilim have taken the last of the blood money for their Glass City. Nearly all of their Institutes are rebuilt. Today we may begin restoring our thrones to glory!" She smiled wildly as a smattering of polite applause filled her chamber.

No sound came from the Unseelie Court. The King tilted his head.

"Do you think it over, Fair One?" His voice was deep, resonating through both of the Courts. "The price may be paid, but there is work still to be done. My people will stay their celebratory revels, I think." He extended his arms out to indicate those behind him. "We needs must continue to labour for the Children of Raziel."

The Queen tightened her grip on the throne. "How fortunate, then, that I chose not to make my people into slaves for the Nephilim. It would not please me to see them toiling with stone and wood to renew the houses of our enemies as payment for the Dark War."

"Yes, instead you would beggar your realm!" The Unseelie King's eyes blazed as he took in her jewels and finery. His look said that he understood they were a sham, a show for the courtiers who didn't know how empty the Seelie coffers were.

The Seelie Queen rose from her throne, seething inwardly. "Do not presume to think I do not know what Iarlash is doing in the Mundane city of lost angels. Is that what the Unseelie Court has become? A haunt for Fey who glamour mortals into parting with their worldly wealth?" She scoffed. "It gives me cause to wonder what else he may be doing there. Whispers of dead Faeries in that area have reached my ears even here."

The King looked thoughtful for a moment, and inclined his head to her. "Better a clever thief than a foolish pawn, Sammaradriel."

Both Courts fell absolutely silent.

Outwardly, the Queen revealed nothing. On the inside, she felt a fury rise in her breast that she had not felt in centuries. How dare he insult me and speak my given name in the same breath! He will pay in blood for this! Her silent anger was drawing down power, filling the room, and the edges of the scrying mirror creaked and warped.

"Have any more of your sons tried to steal your throne, Luchaereon?" She taunted. "How many more will you throw to the Hunt because you are too weak to prune your family tree?" Her hands clenched at her sides, throbbing with the beat of her pulse as it raged within her.

The King's smile was cold and slow in coming. Arynessa saw several of the Seelie courtiers around the edge of the room slip away and vanish through the exits.

"Kieran will be treated gently by the Hunt; I have seen to that. He will have a long, long life of suffering with them that will never be cut short by the fleeting hatred of another. He will work for his people during his exile, a far more useful purpose than a quick death. My son's punishment will be eternal and he will no know rest nor peace." He paused. "Are you so very comfortable on your throne, my Lady?"

The King of the Unseelie Court turned his back on the scrying mirror and gestured sharply, dark energy racing down his hand to snap out at the mirror. It shattered into pieces, smashing down into the moss near the foot of the atoll.

Arynessa cried out and dove backwards, protecting Rayce with her body. The moss cushioned the fall of the glass, though, and any real damage was avoided. Her chest heaved as she looked down to where Rayce was nestled under her, looking up with frightened eyes. She lifted a finger to her lips and he nodded earnestly.

"Out! This audience is dismissed!" The Queen's head whipped around to search out her staff-bearer at the entrance. "Bring me Gwyn ap Nudd. Now." More courtiers slipped away through the exits, the Seelie Queen's children among them. Arynessa was among the last to leave and cast a despairing glance back over her shoulder at her mother. This had been a serious blow, witnessed by many. It could take years to recover from the loss of face.

She chivvied Rayce ahead of her and saw him glance back as well, concern etched on his small face. Arynessa gently shoved him forward, "All will be well, Rayce, you'll see."

Minutes later, Gwyn of the Hunt stepped through the moss curtain woven with glowworms, and approached the throne. Shards of the scrying mirror crunched under his boots. He knelt before the Queen and bowed his head.

"My Lady sent for me, and so have I come with all the speed of the wind. What service may I render you?" He raised his eyes to see her glaring down at him.

"The tribute from the Hunt. I want the tithe for the Seelie Court raised immediately. Twenty percent of your takings, and not a silver less." Her eyes burned with a fervour that gave Gwyn an unsettled

feeling in his heart. He shook his head.

"Forgive me, my Lady, but I cannot do this. Ever has the hunt gifted ten percent to the Seelie Court and ten to the Unseelie. Such was the agreement written when the Hunt was formed. I am bound by my vows and cannot change them. Perhaps more can be done in the Shadow Markets of the world."

He waited, head bowed once more. The air tasted strange in this place. He could sense magic from both of the Courts here; it seemed to crackle around the smashed scrying mirror and swirled around him uncomfortably. Whatever he had missed, perhaps it was for the best.

The Queen's voice was quiet when she replied, "I should have guessed, Hunter, where your allegiance would lie. Leave this place; I have no further use for you."

"As you command, my Lady." Gwyn's massive form rose and he turned, stepping over the glass uneasily. He passed out of the throne room and headed for one of the hidden exits reserved for the Hunt. He was already gone when the Queen screamed in rage and the glowworms burst with her fury.

3. Chapter 2

**2**

September 2012

Light flickered and Zeke groaned.

He slapped his hand over his eyes and rolled onto his side, away from the source of the brightness that was intruding on the beginnings of a spectacular hangover. He felt his week-old scruff of a beard rake across the hard, leather pillow his neck was wedged against.

Leather... pillow? His mind chased scattered thoughts that fled from him like startled cats. With a slightly more forceful groan, he cracked one grey eye open and peered around the tarnished band of his family ring. _Leather... boots. Well, that explains the smell._

"Ezekiel Hightower, the Queen wishes to speak with you at once." A soft voice shattered through his pounding headache and he shushed the voice at once, waving his other hand in its direction, feebly hoping that it would go away.

He heard light footsteps retreat a bit and silently celebrated his prowess from inside his throbbing prison. He wasn't expecting his celebration to be quite so short-lived.

Cold water splashed down on his face as his wash basin was emptied over his head. He yelled, arms flailing as he twisted in his sheets to grapple with whatever demon was so rudely interrupting a perfectly miserable morning. Blinded by the light and squinting when he opened his eyes to seek out his attacker, his legs tangled in the bedclothes as he lunged at the milk-white creature. He missed by a good three feet when the traitorous ground spun under him, tipping him sideways into his bureau. Good, solid oak brought him up short, but it could

also have been the good, solid ground helping. This is how it ends, he thought with strangely mixed feelings about it.

Zeke rolled over to prepare for a deathblow that didn't come. A pair of white demons with green-tinged blond hair stood over him, four pupil-less blue eyes glaring down disapprovingly. With supreme effort, he ordered his eyes to work together, and the two demons merged into one, resolving into one of the Seelie Queen's handmaidens. Kaelie. Great.

He felt that this revelation warranted another groan and he closed his eyes before she could multiply again.

"The Queen requires your presence in her sitting room. She will not be patient." Kaelie crouched down next to him and laid one soft hand across his brow. His raging migraine muted itself at once and he felt a flush of heat race down his body from where she was gently touching his forehead. A measure of strength and coordination returned to his limbs and she seemed to have even quieted the treacherous floor, the spins slowing and then stopping all at once.

He opened his eyes again with renewed clarity, the room around him revealed as the disaster it was. The bed was completely mussed, and now soaked, the sheets strewn all over. Clothes littered the floor alongside empty glasses and bottles, while assorted boots and weapons were thrown around haphazardly with books sprinkled through the detritus. Pushing himself up until he was sitting with his back against the oak chest of drawers, he kicked free of the last bit of blanket and ran his left hand back through black hair that was already shot-through with grey. Kaelie nodded to herself in satisfaction and stood.

"Come." She turned and left his chambers.

Zeke already knew that refusing was a futile, and occasionally embarrassing, option. Arriving for an audience with the Seelie Queen trussed like a pig, complete with a shiny red apple in his mouth, was not something he cared to repeat. His stomach turned over at the thought of eating and he dismissed the thought hurriedly. He stood cautiously. Your move now, floor.

When the floor declined to renew its assault, Zeke moved to follow the handmaiden. He scrubbed the back of his hand across his mouth in an attempt to clean up a bit. The Queen hated things that weren't beautiful, and Ezekiel Hightower was well on his way to becoming one of the ugliest things in her Court. Two decades ago he had been just as sharp and fit as any Nephilim, but the years and drink had not been kind to him.

The oddly-matched pair passed through the tunnels around the throne room, bypassing the great hall. Zeke breathed a little easier. Formal audiences were so much worse. She probably didn't want the embarrassment of being seen speaking to him. A twinge of regret twisted in his stomach. Or maybe just hunger. His insides roiled again. Stop thinking about food.

Kaelie paused for a moment outside a large wooden door that was marvellously carved with scenes of angels falling from Heaven and demons rising from Hell. The workmanship was exquisite; someone had painstakingly gilt strands of hair and added the faintest touches of

silver to blades where they were raised in delicate hands. Tiny, glittering garnets and rubies made fire come alive in the pits of Hell, and Ezekiel stared, heart aching. Or maybe just heartburn.

Tall Faerie knights stood in full armour on either side of the entrance to the Seelie Queen's Royal apartments. One glanced at Zeke and then swiftly away, dismissing him at once. Anger flared inside him. Definitely anger this time. You'd never even see the blade that killed you, elf-boy.

The other guard nodded at whatever Kaelie had said quietly to him and pushed open the magnificent door. The handmaiden proceeded through, Zeke trailing behind her, and there was a moment as he passed the guards when he slipped a glance sideways at where the Faerie-made armour was seamed at the armpit. Right there, elf-boy. He imagined sinking a cold iron blade into that spot. You're dead.

The Queen's sitting room was a far more informal setting than anywhere else she entertained guests. Elegant couches and divans were arranged around the room to provide comfortable seating for close conferences. Kaelie settled him on one of the couches and vanished through a door off to the left.

Zeke flung his arms out over the back of the couch and stretched his feet out to put them up on the low table. It had been years since he had seen the inside of the Queen's apartments. No sense not enjoying them while he could.

A rustle at the door where Kaelie had left was all the warning he had before the Seelie Queen swished through the entry, wrapped in a simple ice-blue gown that could never hope to match her eyes. She was followed by two of her children, the purple one and the blue one; he couldn't remember their names right now. She cast a disapproving look at where his feet rested. He held out for two more seconds before slowly taking them off the table.

The blue kid's lip curled up and he feigned horror, "What is that, mother?" Maybe it wasn't feigned. Black hair fell in straight sheets around the Faerie prince's sculpted face, and his solid black eyes fixed on Zeke imperiously. Each of Queen's children stood to one side of a couch.

"That," the Seelie Queen gestured at Zeke. "Is the tutor I was telling you about, Baelerithon." The prince snorted. How un-courtly.

The Queen perched on the edge of the couch opposite from Zeke and stretched out her left hand behind her for the waiting glass to be pressed into it by her handmaiden. Honey-coloured liquid sparkled and Zeke unconsciously licked his lips.

"Ezekiel Hightower. This is my son, Baelerithon, and my daughter, Arynessa. I have brought you here to offer you employment, of a sort."

"I can't say that I'm terribly interested in employment, my Lady. I have such a busy personal life, you see." The Queen's eyes flashed at his words.

"Perhaps I was being unclear when I said 'offer'. You will train my son in the ways of the Nephilim."

Zeke gave Baelerithon a look of appraisal. "With respect, he'll never make it. Much too old to be starting now."

The Queen sighed, but Zeke could have almost sworn that he caught the hint of a smile touch Arynessa's lips.

"You will serve as an instructor for my son, Rayce. Arynessa tends to his needs, and Baelerithon has been giving him lessons that will help him survive in the Court â€“ but I wish him to be a true Shadowhunter. Teach him how to fight as one of Raziel's children, show him the language of Heaven in your Marks. I expect nothing less than a perfect Nephilim, Ezekiel." The Queen waited for his response.

"Training a half-blood brat?" Zeke sighed heavily. "What's in it for me?" He really hoped the Queen couldn't see him starting to sweat. Or smell him.

She levelled a hard look at him, but said nothing. She turned to each of her children and spoke under her breath. They both nodded and turned to leave. Zeke felt that faint sense of wonder that he always felt when he saw they each had wings. Hers were nearly translucent, while his were black and feathered like raven's wings. I wonder how he sleeps with those things. When they had left, Zeke turned his gaze back to the Queen.

Her hand shot across the distance between them and her power hurled the table across the room to smash against the wall. His jaw was locked in an iron grasp that he wouldn't have expected her to have, and she leaned in closer until their faces were inches apart.

"I only pretend to tolerate the insolence displayed by my own people, Shadowhunter," she hissed. "I need not make any such pretence with you." Her fingers tightened, nails digging into the flesh under his salt-and-peppered scruff. "It is my wish that you perform this service for the throne, but let it not be said that I am ungenerous. Are you listening very closely?"

Zeke nodded as much as her hand would allow, blood pumping through his veins wildly at the ferocity displayed by the Queen. He was excited and terrified at the same time. Men had died for less. He was close enough to smell his own sour breath as it washed over her face, but she only released his jaw and shoved him back against the couch.

"The years have not been kind to you, Ezekiel, although it would perhaps be unfair to expect them to be after what you have done to yourself. I look at you and can see the man who crawled into Faerie, bruised and bleeding, but with a heart that blazed with the fury for revenge. Those who wronged you have long-since passed into death, and revenge no longer bears the same sweet taste. But it is within my power to grant you something more... useful, perhaps."

He swallowed thickly and she reached out to take his hand, bidding him to rise with him.

She lifted his right hand until it was raised between them, palm

facing her, and she gently laid her left hand against his. An arcing white-orange glow spread from her hand to his, wrapping around them and then sinuously climbing his arm. He was panting now, in fear, but he couldn't pull his hand away.

The light twisted and pulsed like a snake, splitting into more and more threads that wound further down his torso and to his legs, cocooning his body and encasing it in a glowing filigree of Faerie magic. More strands crept up his neck and covered his face, and he closed his eyes against what was happening.

One final pulse flashed from the Queen's hand, hot like an iron from the fire and he yelled, yanking back his arm reflexively. He was surprised to see that he could. The glow had faded and he opened his eyes, chest still heaving.

A smile split the Queen's face, radiance pouring from her face and he found himself as entranced as he had been twenty-odd years ago when he had been that bruised and bleeding man. She took hold of his shoulders and turned him around, propelling him to the far wall where a floor-length mirror stood.

Zeke's mouth sagged open in disbelief as he looked at the reflection.

Where once he had had haggard eyes and a sallow complexion, he now saw smooth, firm skin and bright grey eyes. The grey and flecks of white had been chased from his black hair. His jaw flexed, closing his mouth, and he could see his neck held proud, lacking the jowl that had been steadily forming over the last few years. His torso had become lean and he could feel taut abdominal muscles stretching as he turned to take in more of the transformation. His arms were corded with muscle, as they had once been, and he could feel the power in his legs. Fingers clenched and released, free from the joint-pain that had been creeping in. He felt himself laughing, actually laughing, at the wonder of it. Young again!

He whirled back around to face the Queen, eyes shining.

She still wore a delighted smile, more muted than before. "This is what's 'in it' for you," she said. "My power will give you the youth you need to train my son. All of your former strength and agility are returned to you, and will remain so as long as I am pleased with your efforts. I expect you to use them wisely."

She signalled to her handmaiden, who had not been dismissed with the others, and spoke quiet words with her. Zeke stared down at his hands. His fingers were long and smooth again, no more knobby knuckles. And they didn't hurt. Nothing hurt anymore. Not his back, or his knees or his neck. He could feel a stinging sensation behind his eyes as the relief of a life without pain washed over him. His hands shook, but no longer from the need for drink.

"Ezekiel Hightower. Follow me, please." The handmaiden was waiting expectantly, and the Queen of the Seelie Court had left while he had marvelled at the change in his fortune.

"Lead the way," he said.

Kaelie and Zeke walked through the tunnels, much farther than he

would have expected. Wherever the Queen had hidden her half-Shadowhunter son, it was certainly out of the way. After a time, they came to stop at a wooden door set into the end of the tunnel, tendrils growing out of it right into the wall. A darker patch of wood was fixed near the knob.

"Lay your hand on the dark wood, Ezekiel Hightower, and the door will allow you to pass. The Queen wove this gift into you with her spell, and bids you do not use it unwisely. Few have access to these rooms." She paused when he did not reach to obey. "Your belongings will be brought here. This will be your new home."

Zeke stared at the darkened bit near the handle. He thought about the disaster of a room he had left behind, the disaster of a life. He made a choice.

"No. Leave it, burn it, sell it. I don't care. Just send me the weapons."

She nodded in understanding and left him at the door, the globes of light flickering to life and fading back into sleep as she passed. He watched her until she was out of sight, then took a deep breath before pressing his palm to the wood. The tendrils retracted back into the door and the knob gave way under his other hand.

Honey, I'm home.

Arynessa looked up from the table where she was sitting with Rayce when she heard the door roots retract. She'd taken a few minutes to make him more presentable to meet his tutor. Even if Ezekiel was an ageing drunkard, she could still teach Rayce that it was important to make a good first impression.

A dark-haired young man stepped through the door and Arynessa's hand flew to the dagger she kept in her right boot. With only a thought, she sheathed it in a whisper of her magic and flung it with deadly accuracy at the intruder.

He caught it. By the handle. Impossible.

"Oy! I'm not coming home to daggers being thrown at me every day, so you'd better get that out of your system right now, princess!" Ezekiel Hightower. What had her mother done?

Rayce stood slowly and placed himself in front of his sister, eyebrows knitting in concentration as he narrowed his gaze at the intruder. She looked down at him helplessly. Her legs were going to be defended until the death by her little brother.

"Is that him?" Zeke moved closer, getting a good look at the defiant boy, with his mop of white hair and slightly pointed ears. Rayce met his eyes evenly and Zeke was taken aback by the clarity, the focus. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad. This wasn't an ordinary child.

"Yes," Arynessa crouched down behind her brother and spoke to him while keeping her eyes on Zeke. Rayce didn't take his eyes off him either. "Rayce, this is Ezekiel Hightower. He's going to train you in the Nephilim arts, so you must pay very close attention to what he says and obey him as you would myself or Baelerithon. It would please mother greatly for you to excel in your studies with him, do you

understand?"

Rayce continued to study Zeke, taking in his strange round ears and the messy stubble on his face. He took a step forward, and when Zeke did nothing, he walked right up to his new tutor. Arynessa was still crouched where he had left her, and she watched him. Zeke decided to mirror her posture for this strange child, and crouched down as well.

Face-to-face with the boy, he was struck by how beautiful he was. Zeke had never had any regard for children before, but these earnest, curious green eyes charmed him in a moment. Small hands reached up to touch Zeke's ears, and then strayed down to feel the roughness of his beard. Rayce's nose crinkled up as he felt it and he pulled his hands away. Green eyes travelled down and he took Zeke's right hand in his own. He studied his palm for a moment, and then turned it over.

An ugly, angry red scar in the shape of a stylized eye defaced the back of his hand. Rayce turned his face up to meet Zeke's grey eyes.

"What's this?" Honest innocence. It was breaking Zeke's heart to look at this child. Not heartburn this time.

Zeke looked down at his old Voyance rune. A flash of pain-filled memory boiled to the surface of his mind and he slammed the door on it.

"It's where I used to have something called a Voyance rune, Rayce. Until I did something very, very bad and my runes were taken away from me."

November 2016

"Again!" Zeke snapped, the practice sword in his right hand angrily beckoning to Rayce. The boy was sweating freely and breathing heavily, his right hand wrapped around a practice sword hilt, and the other clenching a blunted wooden dagger. Surely no 8-year-old Shadowhunter had ever had to deal with training like this.

"I can't do it. You're too fast." Rayce shook his head. "It's not fair." He started to turn around, but Zeke called out to him.

"Fac fortia et patere. Do brave deeds and endure, Rayce. How will you ever defeat me if you don't hold to your courage when it seems you should give up?"

"I'm not afraid of you," Rayce said, turning back to face Zeke.

"No? Just afraid of losing?" Zeke taunted. He caught Arynessa's scowl from the hallway that led to the bedrooms.

Rayce's face hardened and he tightened his grip on his practice weapons.

Come on, Rayce..

The boy sprang forward, sword and dagger slashing down. Zeke parried them easily with his own weapons, turning them and already pushing back, looking to put the boy off balance on his heels.

Leaning back in, Rayce drove the attack back at his tutor, darting his small weapons at Zeke's guard, looking for a way in, sending sally after sally at him from every angle. High, low, across his mid-section, arcing in and thrusting, Rayce was trying everything he had ever been taught.

Zeke slapped each attack away, occasionally flicking out his practice dagger to rap the boy with the flat, maddening him further. Rayce was now struggling to get inside Zeke's reach, to get to close enough that the sword couldn't be brought to bear effectively, trying to force him to grapple. Feet dancing away nimbly, Zeke refused to fall into the trap, baiting the boy into chasing him closer to the wall of the great room in the apartments where they trained every day.

Blow after blow was parried away by the stripped Shadowhunter, and he pushed his student hard, pressing back with an attack to force him off balance.

Rayce twisted awkwardly, one leg kicking out wildly to catch himself after a half-spin that would leave him vulnerable from behind. His head whipped back to see Zeke moving in to take advantage of his weakness and in that moment, Rayce screamed wordlessly, venting all the pent-up frustration of never being able to get behind his tutor.
I need to be behind him.

Rayce felt a crushing pressure squeeze in around his body, so hard he felt his eyes would burst, but it was over before he could even blink, and he was looking at Zeke's back. A few wisps of something black and smoke-like rose from where he should have been standing. Part of his mind wanted to stop and figure out what had just happened, but the larger part, the part that was completely fuelled by adrenaline now, saw the moment for what it was.

The practice sword cracked across Zeke's back and Rayce leaped, bearing his tutor to the ground, where he held the wooden dagger to the Shadowhunter's throat. He was breathing hard.

Zeke didn't move, and Rayce felt a flash of worry twist in his stomach. "Zeke? Are you okay?" Rayce crawled off his tutor's back and sat on the floor next to him, legs folded neatly, eyes searching.

The older man rolled over onto his side and looked at Rayce, his mouth slightly agape, weapons forgotten. "What did you just do?"

Rayce shook his head. "I don't know."

Arynessa was still frozen in the hallway, forgotten by the boy and his master. She had seen it. But what was it? The Seelie Queen had finally been proven right; Rayce was something the world had never seen. She needed to know.

Zeke and Rayce were standing now, and he was asking the boy to try again, this time without the fighting. The boy dropped his practice weapons and fixed his eyes on Zeke, his face furrowed in concentration. Arynessa silently willed him to succeed.

Seconds passed and still they stood there. The boy's face relaxed for

just a moment and then he vanished again, reappearing behind Zeke an instant later, the curious black trailers curling as they disappeared.

"I can do it!" Rayce shouted, whooping and throwing himself at Zeke. He turned his head to see Arynessa where she was watching and flashed a dazzling smile at her. She nodded and smiled back, her thoughts already racing far ahead.

Later that night, after Rayce had been put to bed, Arynessa slipped out of her bedroom at the end of the hall and padded on cat's feet toward the great room.

"Going somewhere, princess?" Zeke appeared in his doorway, leaning against the door frame.

"I don't answer to you, Shadowhunter."

"Give your mother a kiss from me, will you?" Zeke slid back into his room and closed the door.

Arynessa considered barging in and teaching him a lesson, but the satisfaction would be fleeting, and she was forbidden from doing anything that would be more entertaining. She left the apartments and locked them behind her, hurrying to find her mother.

After she had recounted the events of that evening to the Seelie Queen, Arynessa unconsciously clasped her hands and held them to her breast as she waited for a response.

"Well done, daughter." Arynessa exhaled silently. "Keep close watch and see to it that Ezekiel trains him to use this new ability strategically. I want it to be flawless, and I will desire a demonstration â€“ soon."

Arynessa nodded and bowed her head for a second. "Yes, mother."

The Seelie Queen watched her daughter slip out of the Royal bed chamber, faintly surprised that she had had the courage to come in while her mother was sleeping. But this had certainly been worth it.

She laid back against the nest of pillows and pulled her sheets up higher. She allowed herself a long, contented sigh as she closed her eyes to return to her dreams.

And now things will become more interesting.

4. Chapter 3

***3***

Autumn 2020

"Get a move on, Rayce!" Zeke thumped his fist against the boy's bedroom door and it fell open, revealing an empty room, the bed neatly made. He shook his head.

Zeke continued down the hall toward the great room and looked up when

he crossed the threshold. He was unsurprised to find Rayce running across the boughs up there. Arynessa and Baelerithon had worked together for days to coax living limbs into growing across the great room, joining their earth magic and weaving complex spells to thicken and strengthen them to provide Rayce with the kind of aerial gym that a Shadowhunter would normally have access to. Since then, Zeke had been given good reason to wonder if the boy hadn't picked up some monkey blood somewhere in his strange twist of breeding. With a Morgenstern, you could never rule anything out, it seemed.

Rayce held a quarterstaff comfortably in his hands, whipping the ends out at his imaginary foes, twisting and dodging their invisible attacks, his feet light on the branches as he crossed them with ease. Swiftly back-stepping, he swept the inside of his foot back along the narrow branch like a dancer, still ducking and parrying, completely unaware of the grace with which he was moving. Zeke sighed. It was satisfying to watch, but today was an important day in the life of a Shadowhunter, and it was not the time for games. He put his fingers to his lips and let out a shrill whistle to break the morning quiet.

Rayce's head snapped around and his face broke into a wide smile. He was starting to grow into his features. His cheekbones were much more defined than they had been even just last year, and that strange white hair fell nearly to his shoulders (in a wild mess, usually). His boy's body had started to put on muscle, though he was still small and light. In another few years, he would really start to look like a man.

He pushed off the limb backwards into an arcing back flip, landing lightly on his feet like a cat just two feet from where Arynessa was bringing out fruit and tree nuts to break their fast. Rayce darted in and kissed his sister's cheek with another easy smile, then leaned the staff against the wall to help himself to some food.

Some rabbit food, Zeke thought uncharitably. That had to have been the hardest thing to give up when he had moved in here. While he had lived his life of debauchery he had been free to eat whatever he could get his hands on, but Arynessa was a rather strict vegetarian. If he was very quiet at night he could almost remember the taste of bacon. He sighed, and Arynessa looked up accusingly, almost as if she could tell he had been cheating on her menu with his memories.

Pushing thoughts of nutritional fidelity aside, Zeke cleared his throat.

"Are you sure you're ready for today, Rayce? You can wait longer, prepare a bit more, if you wish." He watched for the boy's reaction.

Rayce grinned lazily. "I appreciate your concern for me, Zeke, but I don't think waiting longer will prepare me any better. I feel ready." Confidence shone in his 12-year old eyes, lending a maturity to those green orbs that made Zeke shake his head faintly to remind himself that this was indeed, still a child.

"Don't say I didn't warn you," Zeke muttered under his breath.

"He is ready," Arynessa insisted. "What Shadowhunter child was ever

prepared so well as Rayce? The Marking ceremony is exactly that â€“ a ceremony. He will be well."

Zeke's eyes shifted out of focus as his memories drifted back to his own first Mark, laid over 40 years ago. The pain had been so minor when compared to the pride he had felt. He scratched absently at what remained of the shattered Voyance rune on the back of his right hand and looked down at the vivid red scarring there. The pain of receiving it had been repaid tenfold - no, a hundredfold, during his Stripping.

"_Ezekiel Hightower, you stand accused of conspiring to commit violence during the signing of the Ninth Accords, of possessing and carrying illegal weapons obtained through nefarious means, and of hate crimes against Downworlders, in direct contravention of the Covenant set forth and protected by the Clave. How do you plead?" The Inquisitor's voice echoed through the Council Hall of the Gard. She stared at the accused who was chained hand and foot where he stood behind a rail to the right side of the room. Loops of chain ran down from his ankles to a ring that had been hammered into the floorboards hurriedly after the disaster in the Accords hall last week._

He hesitated and looked to where the Consul reclined in his seat. The Consul had advised pleading guilty to receive a reduced sentence, cautioning him that entering a plea of not guilty would drive Imogen Herondale into a much harder pursuit of justice. She was so new to her power and so filled with bitter hatred for members of the Circle that he had speculated that the best way to handle her was to placate her. She would accept a guilty plea and he would be exiled, as so many others had been, or given a deal for leniency if he could aid in the capture of other Circle members. Very few Shadowhunters ran the risk of execution for their involvement in what was quickly becoming known as the Uprising, particularly because Valentine Morgenstern had consigned himself and his family to a fiery end at Fairchild Manor. A guilty plea was the safer course of action.

Ezekiel locked eyes with the Inquistor.

"_Guilty." _

Imogen regarded him with a spark of excitement in her eyes, a small but feral smile curving her lips. She spun on her heel to address the members of the Clave observing the trials that day, throwing out her arms theatrically.

"_Brothers and sisters, hear me. This man has freely admitted to breaching the most sacred tenant of the Covenant by threatening violence against those whom he was sworn to protect. He freely admits that he consortied with demons, our natural enemies, to obtain weapons that would pass undetected by our loyal guards of the Accords Hall. That he did so knowingly and deliberately plot to disrupt our peaceable negotiations with our honourable Downworld allies is unforgivable. Ezekiel Hightower has turned his back on us as Shadowhunters. He has forgotten our very mandate from Heaven above." She paused for effect, gauging the reaction of the gathered Clave members._

"_Let us now turn our backs on him, and strip from him that which once bound him to our heavenly ancestry. I hereby pronounce judgement on Ezekiel Hightower. Let him be henceforth Stripped of his Marks and

exiled from Alicante from this day unto the end of days. He shall be Nephilim no more." _

_Fierce applause burst from the gallery and Zeke felt his knees give way as the horror washed over him. He braced his chained hands against the railing in front of him, sagging against it as he struggled to breathe. Stripped. A rare punishment among the Nephilim. The removal of his permanent Marks, and the withdrawal of Heaven's blessing, that they may never be reapplied. His flesh would be as a Mundane's; any Marks applied would cause agony, and if continued, would eventually turn him into one of the Forsaken. _

Voices were lifted in agreement and the noise of the Council Hall rose around the still-mute Ezekiel. He couldn't even bring himself to raise his head and look to the Consul for mercy. The Inquisitor held the power to mete out punishment in the Clave. He could hear the righteous agreements being thrown around by the Shadowhunters in the gallery and despaired. What chance would he have with an appeal? He had already pleaded guilty.

He was still on his knees when two Shadowhunters came to unlock the chains looped around his ankles and attached to the ring in the floor. They each took hold of one of his elbows and led him away from the buzzing assembly.

They led Zeke back down to the cells under the Gard where he had been languishing since he had been overpowered by a pair of werewolves and disarmed. His blade had been clean; no charges could be tabled for murder. Bitterly he wished that he had been soaked in the blood of Downworlders, that he had earned a punishment severe enough to warrant execution. Not this. He would lose everything.

_The cell door squeaked open and he was thrust back inside, the bars locked behind him once more. He placed his wrists through a small gap in the bars to allow the guards to unchain him from outside, and then they vanished back down the dark hallway of the cell block. _

_He almost wished that Hodge was still here. At least he had been someone to talk to, someone with whom to curse Jocelyn Morgenstern's name. He had seen her throw open the doors to the Accords hall and then step back to watch her brothers and sisters be taken down by monsters. She had betrayed them all. And Lucian Graymark! To see him alive and leading the Downworld charge! It had been such a stunning turn of events that he had stood frozen when the slaughter was joined, left on the edge of a battle that he could no longer believe was happening. _

But Hodge Starkweather had cut some sort of deal with the Clave, like the Lightwoods before him, and had been taken away last night. Now it was just Ezekiel, unless they managed to catch any more Circle members and bring them in for trial. He hadn't seen the Pangborn brothers or Samuel Blackwell down here; maybe they had successfully escaped. Their families had connections in the Mundane world. If they could run far enough fast enough, they might be able to go to ground and stay off the Shadowhunter's radar until things cooled down. He wished them well.

_Zeke moved over to where a narrow board folded down from the stone wall with a thin mattress on it and set it in place. He sat down and

drew his knees up, clasping hands on opposite elbows as if he could hold himself together purely through physical effort. A tear rolled down his left cheek and he angrily rubbed his face against his shoulder. Another one fell, then, and another, and Zeke stopped trying to hold them back._

_Regret finally washed over him and he let himself cry out his frustration, his fear, and his sadness for what had happened and what was still to come. He was only 26 years old, and this is what he had done to himself. It had seemed so clear in the beginning. But it had become this; locked in a cell under the Gard waiting for his sentence to be carried out. Sobs racked him now, and he thought about his parents and his sister. He would never see them again. Exiles were never allowed to return to their families. What had he done to the Hightower name? He had stained a centuries-old family with his treason. Tears fell for the shame that burned in his belly and he desperately wished that he could go back and tell himself to never speak those words. _

He whispered bitterly into the falling darkness of his cell, "I hereby render unconditional obedience to the Circle and its principles. I will be ready to risk my life at any time for the Circle, in order to preserve the purity of the bloodlines of Idris, and for the mortal world with whose safety we are charged." He snorted deep in his throat and spat, unfolding his legs to stand.

Imogen Herondale stood silently on the other side of the cell door, watching him through the bars. She shook her head when their eyes met.

"_Still clinging to your master's ideals, Ezekiel?" She moved forward to wrap her long white fingers around the bars. "I'll see you burn for it, traitor. You, and every last one of your precious Circle members. You'll pay in blood."_

Zeke saw the fanatic zealotry burning in her eyes and didn't say anything. She was beyond listening. Anything he said would only make it worse. He knew that she had been destroyed by grief when her son, Stephen, had died in a raid, and then her daughter-in-law had committed suicide while she was still eight months pregnant with the Inquisitor's first grandchild. Her husband, Marcus, had died of grief soon after their son's death and now she was alone, her entire family taken from her in such a short time. Indeed, she had been an easy choice to replace her predecessor when the previous Inquisitor had been killed in the Uprising. No one would pursue justice so faithfully as her, it was believed.

But somewhere along the way, justice had become vengeance, and now the trials were at last giving her an outlet into which she could pour all of her toxic hatred for the Circle that had taken so much from her.

She unclenched her fingers from the bars and turned away from him, her heels rapping on the stone as she returned to the Gard above.

_Anger seized Zeke, burning away the guilt and fear from before. He reached back and pulled his dirty shirt off, casting it into the corner where his empty water jug sat forgotten. His boots, socks, and

torn gear trousers followed until he stood in his small clothes. He stepped into the patch of weak moonlight that filtered through the bars of his small window from the street above._

He stretched his arms out in front of him and let his eyes travel from the Voyance rune on the back of his right hand up past the others that he had taken on over the years. White scars showed where hundreds, probably thousands of others had been used in battle. He traced a map across his body in the faint light that showed the journey he had taken to get here. His eyes drank in the curling black lines that made him a child of Raziel, blessed on earth as a warrior of Heaven, and he tried to fix this image of himself in his mind. He'd lost his way, and the path to redemption would soon be closed to him. This is how he wanted to remember himself. Whole. Complete. Unbroken.

The chill in the air caressed his skin and it seemed as if he could almost feel it trailing along his Marks, teasing him, because soon those Marks would be burning and he would beg for a cool touch to end his suffering.

Zeke stood in the light to stare at his Marks and shivered as the hours passed.

_He woke when a Nephilim guard clanged the hilt of a dagger on the bars of the cell. Zeke shot up from the thin bed where he had finally collapsed, exhausted, in the early hours of the morning. It was time.

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The condemned Shadowhunter pulled on his discarded clothes, conscious of the eyes watching him. He docilely slipped his hands through the door to be chained. Last night he had made peace with himself. He would hold on to what honour he had left.

They marched deeper into the cell block, somewhere Zeke had never seen, or indeed, even known of. It must have been several stories underground; the air was cold and stale, and the floor had changed to hard-packed earth from the neat stonework above. Witchlight held high to dispel the darkness, the Shadowhunter led them to a thick iron door and pushed the heavy portal open with his shoulder, revealing a circular room with a high ceiling.

Fear spiked in the pit of Zeke's stomach.

Torches had been lit instead of traditional witchlight, and the smell of burning pitch was a sharp stink in the air, while a fire burned in a hearth at the opposite end of the room. Wildly, Zeke wondered how far the chimney would have to go to vent the smoke outside, and he squashed the thought. Long lengths of chain hung from the ceiling in the centre of the room, and two more Shadowhunters moved quickly to manoeuvre him into position and lock his arms above his head. His ankles were once again tethered to a ring in the floor and he felt sick with fear. This was happening. This was real.

All three of the Shadowhunters left and it wasn't long before Imogen entered the room with a tall, cloaked figure behind her. Parchment-coloured robes brushed the dirt floor and Zeke knew what sort of monstrous face was hidden in the cowl; the Silent Brothers seldom varied.

"Allow me to introduce Brother Antioch, Ezekiel," said the Inquisitor, pushing the heavy door closed. The Silent Brother remained predictably silent, and Zeke felt his fear bubble over into quiet hysteria as he started to laugh at the thought of a silent Silent Brother. He couldn't help himself. His fear needed release, and this was how it was getting out._

Imogen's eyes narrowed and she strode forward to slap him, hard, across the face, rocking him sideways in his chains. He tasted blood. That was probably the only thing he'd be tasting for a while. His own, personal vintage, aged perfectly for 26 years. More laughter rolled out of him and the Inquisitor flew into a rage, striking him over and over, curling her hands into fists to pummel his sides, his kidneys, and his face, in particular. Her feet kicked out viciously at his legs, but still, he laughed.

He spat a glob of blood on floor and flashed her a reddened smile. "Not bad for a grandma," he taunted. "But I guess you don't count as a grandma if the brat is never born."

Zeke would never forget her face in that moment. All the pain, the rage, and the heartbreak were rolled into one, singular expression that he was sure he would never see again. She launched herself at him, and he could see that she was truly demented now. She would kill him with her bare hands. But it had to be better than Stripping.

_At that moment, Brother Antioch stepped forward swiftly and pulled Imogen away from Zeke, his strong hands trapping hers. She locked her eyes on the shadowy face that was only partially visible in the firelight, and Zeke knew that the Brother was speaking to her with his mind, projecting his thoughts for her alone. _

Zeke swore inwardly. Antioch must have caught that last thought and realized the game that was being played. Zeke decided to swear much more loudly in his mind, mentally yelling with all his concentration with the most inventive insults he could imagine, literally. He wondered if Antioch could still carry on a conversation with Imogen if Zeke was hollering in his skull like this. He hoped he gave the bastard a headache.

Antioch released Imogen after their silent conference and she backed away to the wall next to where the fire was blazing away in the hearth. She slid down the wall with no regard for her fine clothes, settling in the dirt, knees bent, with her wrists balanced casually across them. Her eyes glittered darkly, reflecting points of fire from the torches around the room, and Zeke started to regret his decision to goad her.

The Silent Brother approached Zeke.

Yes_, he thought at Zeke, _I can carry on a conversation while listening to a fool rave. And no, I do not have a headache. _The Silent Brother's hood tilted to one side as he cocked his head, seeming to assess Zeke in the flickering light. _Shall we begin?

_The twisted Shadowhunter produced a small knife and cut away Zeke's clothes without another thought. He then pulled a stele made of black adamas _from a fold in his robes. He held it poised in his left

hand, raised to where it caught the torchlight and seemed to drink it in. The tip pressed against his chest and The Silent Brother began to slowly trace the rune backwards._

Zeke threw back his head and screamed. The pain was like boiling acid being surgically drawn across his flesh, as if one type of burning wasn't enough torture and it had to be twin fires of flame and chemical in one. He desperately pulled away from the black stele, twisting away from Antioch, but the chains brought him up short. His chest heaved and he was consumed by terror that was only heightened by knowing he couldn't escape.

The stele lowered to his chest again, and Antioch continued reversing the rune, drawing more screams from Zeke, more thrashing, until the tip lifted away and Zeke hung from his wrists, shaking violently and sobbing.

The once-black rune was now carved in blood.

"_Slower, Antioch." Imogen called from her place on the floor, eyes fixed on the panting man in front of her. "I want to see him suffer."_

Zeke had hung in that room for two days while Imogen and Antioch came and went, sometimes taking hours to remove a single Mark. He'd screamed himself hoarse after only two. He didn't remember much after that. He'd gone away inside himself somewhere where he could survive the Stripping. Somewhere where he could dream of revenge against the Consul, Antioch, and most of all, Imogen. He wasn't going to die down here; his sentence was exile. He would heal. And then he would find a way to destroy them all.

When it was done, Antioch had vanished with the black stele and Imogen had gone with him. Two Nephilim guards had come to release him from his chains and he'd collapsed into the dirt that had slowly become mud over the last two days as he had bled over it. They had carried him from the room with a dark sack pulled down over his face, leaving it in place until he was somewhere else in the Gard.

_When it was tugged off, the gleaming Gard portal shimmered in front of him. A warlock took hold of him and they stepped through together, the Downworlder's thoughts guiding their destination. _

Again, Zeke hit the ground, but it was snow this time. Sweet, blessed, cold snow. The warlock leaned over him, offering a hand to help him up. Zeke flinched back from the hand that ended in talons.

"_Don't touch me, warlock._"

Coolly unconcerned with the refusal, the warlock pointed west.

"_The city of Paris lies that way," He turned and began weaving his hands to cast a spell, probably a portal of his own._

"_Why Paris?" Zeke asked grudgingly._

"_All roads lead to Paris," the warlock quoted._

"_That's Rome, you idiot!" Zeke struggled to stand and failed. "I don't speak French! Put me somewhere useful!"_

The warlock shook his head and finished his casting, then stepped into nothingness.

"_I hate the French!" Zeke shouted hoarsely, his voice still raw._

He laid in the snow, looking up at the blue sky above, clouds drifting by lazily. He worked gingerly around his raw wounds to restore a bit more circulation, willing his legs to support him again. When he felt stronger, he raised himself shakily and looked west. His feet refused to move. They probably hated the French, too.

"_You look like you've seen better days, Shadowhunter," a voice called from behind him. He could have sworn he had been alone a moment ago. He whirled and ended up back in the snow, but this time with a view of what was obviously a Faerie, long white-blond hair plaited over a dark-skinned shoulder that was bare even in the cold. Zeke could see a wing fluttering on the Faerie's left side, but nothing on the right._

"_I don't think I count as a Shadowhunter anymore, elf-boy." He righted himself again, but decided that standing might not be a great idea just now._

"_Not if you don't think so, no. Though your Marks were Stripped and your blood was spilled, is it not the same blood that pumped through your heart yesterday? Do mortal hands have the power to destroy that which is divine?" The Faerie's mouth quirked for a moment and he moved toward Zeke, crouching in the red snow around him. His eyes were grey, so much like Zeke's own that he was taken aback with surprise._

"_Where will you go now, broken Shadowhunter? Will you begin your Mundane life in the City of Love while it is hate that burns in your heart?"_

Zeke stared into those unsettling eyes. "Who are you?"

"_You may call me Cassius, Nephilim-who-is-not. I can take you to the Courts where you may heal and cling to the fringes of the life you have lost." He swept his arm across the horizon at the city. "There, you will lose your connection to the Shadow world. With me, the Clave will not shake you from their back so easily."_

"_Why would you help me?" Zeke knew Faeries well enough by now to know that nothing was ever free._

Cassius reached up with his left hand to touch the back of his right shoulder. "Perhaps I, too, know what it is to be broken. Loneliness can be a terrible thing." He offered Zeke the same hand that had touched where he had been maimed, and the Shadowhunter reached out to take it. Rising to his feet was far easier with Cassius' help, and he could feel new strength rush into him from his benefactor's hand.

_No more was said as they walked away from the patch of churned up,

blood-soaked snow and dipped down into a glen. A perfectly round, frozen pond lay at the bottom, deep blue surface brushed with a dusting of snow. Zeke shivered, his wet, ruined clothes no longer providing any semblance of protection from the cold. _

They stood close together on the ice in the centre of the pond and Cassius folded his one remaining wing around Zeke, drawing him close and shielding his view. In an instant the cold and the sky had vanished, replaced by a pleasant warmth and an earthy smell.

He had come to the Land Under the Hill.

"Ezekiel Hightower, you will answer the Queen at once." Kaelie Whitewillow's voice cut through his painful memories in an instant.

Zeke snapped back to the present and silently thanked his feet for cooperating with his brain's autopilot commands to bring him to the informal reception room of the Seelie Court. Damn good feet, both of them.

The smaller reception room was typically used when the Queen wished to entertain courtiers of middling status, carefully balanced to honour them while not attaching such great importance as a formal audience in the throne room. She was walking a fine tightrope these days, but Zeke had to admit that she was handling it with flare.

He groped for the question but couldn't remember hearing one. His mind raced, lightning-quick and he addressed the Seelie Queen where she was reclined on a divan set upon a small dais.

"I apologize, Fair One, but my eyes were so dazzled by your beauty that my ears were left deaf."

The Queen's lips curled into a smile as she saw through his lie but allowed it. She had always been a sucker for compliments.

"I asked if you had everything you needed to proceed."

Zeke turned to see Rayce standing behind him, excitement stamped on his face. Arynessa had already moved over to stand with Baelerithon. Zeke fumbled through his clothes and came up with a stele, white adamas sparkling memories of black. He banished the thought. The past was past. Today was for Rayce.

"Normally this would be done with help from the Silent Brothers, but I don't think anything has ever been normal where Rayce is concerned. Arynessa and Baelerithon have agreed to stand in and assured me there would be no danger to Rayce."

The Seelie Queen nodded and motioned for him to continue.

Zeke was counting on the Fey to have no idea of what to expect for a Marking ceremony, as he wasn't entirely sure what to do himself. It wasn't like he'd been invited over to his friends' places for theirs. This wasn't a bar mitzvah. And he certainly wasn't a Silent Brother. Memories of Antioch burned and he continued mentally jumping up and down on those old memories. He had prepared Rayce as well as he could for this. The boy had been right this morning; waiting longer wouldn't make a difference.

He bade Rayce to kneel before him and he took the boy's right hand. It seemed so small in his own. Unblemished by the scars that this life would give him, it contrasted starkly with Zeke's. Arynessa stepped behind Rayce and placed her hands on his shoulders, kneeling to reach him. Baelerithon took up his position behind Zeke, hands resting gently on his shoulders. It had seemed like a pretty good idea at the time when he had been making this all up, but he felt oddly reassured by the prince's light touch, and he tightened his grip on the stele in his right hand. They were an odd sort of family, but the last eight years had been good. He looked past the ruins of his own Voyance rune to where Rayce's hand waited, laid in trust, awaiting this next step on his journey.

Zeke set the tip of the stele to Rayce's hand and drew the Voyance rune, pouring every bit of love that he'd stocked up for the boy over the years into it. Rayce's breath hissed inward and he started panting as he felt the burning etch across his skin. His hand shook in Zeke's as he finished drawing the open eye, but the rune appeared smoothly, the black contrasting sharply with the boy's fair skin.

He released Rayce's hand and unconsciously bit the inside of his lip, waiting.

Rayce cradled his hand against his chest and Zeke could see that his face was pinched with the pain. The Queen looked on from her dais, and even Kaelie had leaned forward to watch. The boy's breathing slowed as he regained control and forced himself to inhale evenly and exhale slowly, as Zeke had taught him. His face relaxed gradually until he had mastered himself and then his startling green eyes opened again, fixing on Zeke with undisguised pride, so much like Zeke had looked at his father over four years ago.

Arynessa and Baelerithon had drilled Rayce repeatedly for this part of the ceremony, and to his credit, he did not forget their lessons. His sister released his shoulders and Rayce rose, twisting his freshly-Marked hand over his breast and folding his left behind his back, bowing deeply to his mother.

"I do so pledge my honour to the throne, that my victories may be yours, that my glory may belong to you, and that my blade may be wielded by your hand. Eternal honour to the Seelie Court," he carefully recited.

The Queen was enchanted by her son and clapped her hands in delight. She rose from the divan, white silk gown trailing behind her as she descended toward where Rayce was still bowed. She lifted his chin gently and he stood up straight, meeting her eyes with a touch of wonder in his own. He so rarely saw his mother, let alone felt her touch, that he could feel his heart bursting with love inside his chest.

She leaned in and gently pressed a kiss to his cheek.

"I believe you will make me very proud, my son." Stepping back, she motioned Kaelie over. The handmaiden bore a dark blue velvet box in her hands, and she presented it to Rayce to open.

He seemed nearly dazed from his mother's unexpected display of affection as he pushed the lid open. Nestled within was a pair of

pristine white gauntlets, beautifully crafted and sized for his small hands. He looked to his mother and she nodded encouragingly for him to take them.

Rayce lifted them out of the box with reverence and Kaelie stepped away. The Queen's eyes burned with pleasure as he pulled them on and she whispered to him softly.

"Now, you are a prince of the Courts."

**Author's note: The physical description and name for the character of Cassius was submitted by Emma Morgenstern and was chosen to appear in this story with her permission._

5. Chapter 4

4

Summer 2022_

Rayce was bursting with excitement on the inside but was careful not to let it show on his face. Baelerithon had spent many long hours teaching him to master his expressions, to only show the emotion that he wanted others to see. The Fey are unable to speak untruths, Baelerithon had cautioned him, but you'll find their faces lie with ease. You must strive to master this, or be taken in by your enemy's artifices.

Living as they did, hidden away in the far reaches of the Seelie Court, Rayce had not yet had a chance to practice this skill with any supposed enemies, but he hoped that he would be ready when the day came. Baelerithon had made no secret that his Shadowhunter blood made him a target for the Fey who blamed his father for the failed Dark War and the resulting Cold Peace. Others would mark him out for being a son of the Seelie Queen, who was still consolidating her power nearly a decade and a half after the throne had been shaken by the debts incurred to the Nephilim, the loss of many territories in the Mundane world, and the slow economic growth of their Courts as they struggled to recover under the yoke of sanctions that were far too harsh. It was a difficult time to be a prince of the Seelie Court, but Rayce was determined to acquit himself well.

Tonight would provide that opportunity at last. The Nephilim and their Downworlder allies were celebrating the signing of the Eleventh Accords in Alicante today, without the Fey, and instead the Queen was hosting a glorious celebration of their own. Months had been spent making preparations for the revels, and in defiance of the mandate that no Faerie be allowed to bear arms, she had set a tournament of champions to entertain courtiers and low-born Fey alike. And Rayce had been named to the champion's roll! At last, a chance to show everyone what he could do!

He had dressed carefully in his light-weight black leather armour. Zeke said that when he had finished growing, he might be able to find an actual set of Shadowhunter gear, but it was too much trouble to acquire sets that he would soon outgrow. He flexed the last piece of his armour in his hands, hesitating before donning it. A half-mask. It covered the lower half of his face. Arynessa had suggested it, saying that the mystery would add to his appeal, but it got awfully

hot in there...

Rayce sighed and slipped it on. He would honour his sister's wishes. He left his bedroom and padded down the hall to the great room. It had changed over the years as he had progressed in his training, the walls covered in more weapons, and the great tree limbs that made up his aerial training course had slowly grown patches of moss and mushrooms. He took a deep breath in as he did every time he crossed into this room. It smelled like home.

Arynessa was already waiting for him with Zeke, and Rayce's breath caught for a moment. His sister was sheathed in a one-shouldered white silk column dress, done in the Grecian style. Delicate white flowers and petals twined up her other shoulder and across her collar bones, brushing gently against her soft lilac skin. Her small waist was circled with more of the same flowers, and the dress spilled to the floor from there. Her purple hair was drawn back into an intricate, yet lazy-looking sweep that still allowed her tresses to float down across the open back of the dress where still more flower petals dotted down from one shoulder until they faded at her lower back. Her purple hair was drawn back into an intricate, yet lazy-looking sweep that still allowed her tresses to float down across the open back of the dress where still more flower petals dotted down from one shoulder until they faded at her lower back. When he stopped to stare at the diamond and amethyst jewels sparkling in her hair and from her ears she fixed him with a teasing look and arched an eyebrow at him.

"Did you forget that I am still a princess of the Seelie Court, brother?" Rayce tried to stammer an apology or a compliment, or even just some sort of intelligible words, and failed miserably.

Baelerithon would have been disappointed. So much for all of his control, if his own sister could so easily disarm him.

Zeke pushed off from the wall where he had been leaning. "Well if you could find the royal feather duster when we get back, princess, I think you've missed a few spots in my room." He tossed Rayce the double-bladed staff that had been a gift from the Queen for her son's 13th birthday the year before. He caught it easily and latched it into place on the harness that he wore across his back without a second thought. The weapon had become a part of him the day his mother had bonded it so.

Arynessa shot Zeke a look of disgust, but did not respond. She held her hand out to her brother, and Rayce offered his arm genially. The three of them left the apartments behind. Arynessa glided along at her brother's side, leading the way through the tunnels of the land under the hill. Even Zeke had not come this way often, and certainly not since moving in with the Seelie Queen's children. They were heading toward the ley line terminus.

Following the Cold Peace, it had become increasingly dangerous for the Fey to travel in the world above when they had lost the protection of the Accords. Vampires with a taste for Faerie blood, werewolves with grudges, and even warlocks had started taking advantage of the unarmed Faeries and many had been killed before they could regain the safety of the Courts. Never one to be stopped by the lesser races, the Seelie Queen had conceived the notion for a system of travel that would make use of the world's ley lines. The Fey had always been the most skilled in the workings of the earth's magic, and it had not taken long before a way had been devised to step into them and travel safely along the veins of the earth. A more primitive version of this had been used to move Sebastian Morgenstern's Endarkened forces during the Dark War.

The Unseelie Faeries had always held greater confidence when working with ley line magic, but the Queen had left them out of her plan deliberately. She had envisioned an even greater exploitation of the earth magic once it had been proven to work, and even now, Seelie artisans and sorcerers were working toward carving out a place that existed outside the realms of Men and Fey alike, cradled within a ley line chasm. She dreamed of the revenues the throne could generate by operating a place that would be untouchable by the Nephilim. The Shadow Markets in the Mundane world were a pale reflection of what she hoped to achieve.

Soon, others appeared in the tunnels around Rayce, Arynessa, and Zeke. Sideways glances and whispers followed them. Rayce adopted a look of confident indifference, eyes predatory but calm, posture nearly arrogant, his instructions from Baelerithon clear in his mind. His brother had warned him that tonight was pivotal for his position in the Court, that he would be weighed in the balance and must not be found wanting. He must show strength.

The terminus was crowded with all sorts of Faeries in every hue imaginable. Wings fluttered, hooves stamped, and horns poked up through the crowd to mark their owner's positions. Rayce watched as small groups stepped up to the blue-white blaze at the end of the platform and then vanished inside the light.

When they reached the head of the queue, it was their turn to be enfolded by the blaze of ley line magic, and Rayce felt apprehension twist in his gut as he stepped over the threshold with Arynessa holding tightly to his arm. His vision flared a brilliant white-blue and he snapped his eyes shut. Heat enclosed him and he felt as if his flesh were searing over an open flame, racing over his skin greedily. He fought the urge to scream and he felt his sister's hand grip his forearm, for comfort or in warning, he couldn't tell.

It was over in a few moments and the light vanished, leaving him standing in a blissfully dark cavern. Wisps of smoke drifted up from his face and hair, the only places not covered by his armour. Zeke was smoking much more heavily and coughed violently a few times, beating at his clothes as if he really had been set on fire. He pushed his hands back through his dark hair and shook his head.

"I really do hate that. A man is not meant to be cooked well-done. I'm much more of a rare kind of guy." Arynessa's eyes shot daggers at him for even alluding to steak. Zeke backpedaled. "Rare... zucchini."

Rayce was secretly pleased that the leather half-mask was concealing his smile from his sister; he was pretty sure that his training hadn't advanced far enough along to keep a straight face for this. The Fey were not known for their sense of humour, and he was happy that he had Zeke so that he could learn about human teasing.

"A forbidding was woven through these channels against those of Nephilim blood, Ezekiel. Consider yourself fortunate that I travel with you, or you may have found yourself as a bit more of a... char-broiled... zucchini." A small, slow smile spread across Arynessa's beautiful face.

The threesome moved quickly to clear the arrival area and left the

shallow cavern. An ancient forest stretched away in every direction under the night sky, black trunks rising up toward the moonlight. Rayce inhaled deeply, his first breath of open air. He wondered at the vastness of the sky above him and felt his heart fall in love with the moon and the stars instantly. Baelerithon had warned him that it might be frightening the first time, all that open space, but this was wonderful. He felt alive.

Arynessa was still guiding him gently with her hand on his arm, Zeke trailing. They were heading toward an area that had been lit by Faerie light, floating unsupported in the darkness. When they broke through the trees, a great clearing was revealed, brightly lit and already filling with Fey from all over the world. Laughter rang out, chiming like bells in the wind, and Rayce could hear faint music from farther back in the trees. At the far end of the clearing, a twisted throne of ancient oak rose from the ground, waiting for the Seelie Queen. They passed behind it in silence and Rayce sighed inwardly. It was so grand.

Arches of creatively-grown boughs enclosed an area at the edge of the trees, ivy and moss growing over to screen the inside from view. Arynessa stepped through a curtain of dangling ivy and motioned for Rayce and Zeke to follow her.

"This is where you must wait for the tournament to begin, brother. Follow the other knights when they enter the clearing and wait for any challenges. Hold to your honour, Rayce. You've trained hard for this, and I am certain that there are very few warriors who could match you even now. Gwyn of the Hunt, perhaps, and one or two others I know, but they will not come tonight." Arynessa gestured to a stump that had been smoothed and contoured, offering Rayce somewhere to sit. "Wait here, both of you." She brushed her lips across Rayce's brow and slipped back out into the night, white silk whispering across the ground.

"You'll notice that I didn't get a kiss, right?" Zeke snorted. "You can wait in here, Rayce, but there's no way that I'm missing out on Faerie revels. Nothing else like them in the world. I just need to find a pretty something to give me a token so I don't end up gnawing on my own toenails in an hour." He clapped his hand on the boy's shoulder and pushed through the ivy as well.

Rayce was alone in the make-shift pavilion. Zeke and Baelerithon had taught him patience, but it was sorely tempted now. He could hear the noise outside rising as more and more of the Fey filtered into the clearing and his curiosity soared. His heart warred with his mind silently and he had almost resolved to just go outside for a little bit of a wander when the ivy was brushed aside and a tall Faerie knight entered.

White chain-link mail nearly shone with an inner light, and the knight reached up to remove a great helm adorned with the antlers of a stag. A shock of thick, dark hair fell free and tilted black eyes fixed on Rayce with interest.

"The little Shadowhunter prince, at last. I had heard that you would be brought out for show and put through your paces tonight, but I had hardly dared to hope." The knight's voice was low and rippled over Rayce like soft velvet.

Baelerithon had cautioned him to employ stoic silence if he could not be sure to gain advantage with a response. _It is far more difficult for your enemies to gain a hold on you if you provide nothing with which they might grapple_.

He was spared from answering as other knights began to arrive and gave greetings to one another. Rayce watched their interactions intently, catching some names spoken in low voices. His eyes followed the knights as they spoke quietly with heads drawn close or with open postures and loud voices. He absorbed as much detail as possible and filed it away for examination later. Nearly all of them shot sideways glances at the silent prince who had moved to one side of the enclosure to avoid leaving his back exposed. He returned every glace with a hard stare of his own, his green eyes filled with confidence and a hint of challenge. Inside, his heart raced, but outwardly he appeared calm. He silently thanked his sister for the half-mask that concealed the flush in his cheeks.

The Seelie Queen's voice lifted outside the pavilion to address the gathered Fey. Inside, the knights formed a double column, and Rayce slipped into line at the back. Cheers and wild stamping rang through the crowd, though Rayce could see a few of the knights shaking their heads and murmuring to each other ahead of him. His mother's hands clapped together and the knights marched forward smartly, entering the clearing through a gap in the onlookers.

When they stood before the gnarled oak throne they knelt as one to the Queen. Rayce stared up at his mother, drinking in the radiance that shone from her, until a ripple passed in front of the throne. His green eyes flicked toward the movement and he could see the faint image of a young girl, probably a only few years younger than himself. She appeared ghostly, but even so, her hair glittered a gold-blond that was shot through with platinum, silver, and bronze threads. Her gold eyes were locked on Rayce's in what looked like shock and his eyebrows drew together in confusion. _She can see me?_

The apparition vanished in the next second like it had never been there and Rayce exhaled slowly, unaware that he had even been holding his breath. He'd felt such a connection with the strange vision, and it unsettled him.

Time passed in a blur as the first of the knights, the one in the white chain-link mail who had taunted him, took his place in the arena to await the first challenger. Rayce and the others formed a double line in front of the throne and knelt once more as an honour guard while the matches were fought. His place on the end gave him an unobstructed view of the combatants, and he watched the matches eagerly.

He had only ever fought against Zeke in the last ten years. Although Baelerithon had been trained, he declined to cross blades with his little brother, and Arynessa had laughed away his challenges, telling him that she knew how to choose her battles. He had always been given the impression that Zeke was not as strong a fighter as the Fey, that his human blood would handicap him. But Rayce could see now that he had been wrong. Zeke could easily defeat these Faerie knights... and Rayce could easily defeat Zeke.

Rayce felt his excitement mounting as the line of Faerie nights to

his left dwindled one by one as they fought against challengers from all over the world. There were a great number of Faeries who had not retreated to the Courts after the Cold Peace had been handed down, secluding themselves further within the human world instead. This place, deep within the Black Forest of Germany, had been a Faerie stronghold for centuries, inspiring many Mundane 'fairy-tales'.

At last, Rayce was the final champion remaining and he moved forward to take his place on the churned-up floor of the arena. He wondered who would challenge him.

"Can the Seelie throne count on your support when the time comes, Cassius?" Arynessa asked of the one-winged Faerie. Dealing with him always filled her with mixed emotions, though she had known him for over a century. A thin screen of trees hid the arena from view where they conferred just inside the tree line.

"Do you know what price your mother has set to challenge your young brother tonight, beautiful Arynessa?" His grey eyes searched her own.

"Yes." She would give him no more of an answer than that if he was going to answer her questions with more questions.

"How long will you allow him to believe that he fights for the honour of the throne, and not simply to refill the royal coffers from the purses of those who would pay any price to so freely attack one of the children of Raziel? Or indeed, to clash with a prince of the Courts?" His left hand stroked the long white-blond plait that ran down his chest.

"My brother will know when he needs to. Let his young mind dream a while longer." She touched Cassius' shoulder with carefully measured hesitation and delicacy. "It is you who concerns me now."

A scream of pain pierced the night from the arena and Arynessa's head whipped toward it, her hand flying to her throat in fear. It hadn't sounded like Rayce, but...

Cassius laughed quietly beside her, a low chuckle that made her ears burn with shame. "You care about him, princess. Now I know." He folded his dark leathery wing around himself and vanished before Arynessa could say another word.

She pushed through the spectators and saw Gwyn of the Hunt forcibly lifting away her brother's opponent as the maddened Hunter screamed at Rayce, "You are not a Shadowhunter!" Her brother looked confused, and she could read the hurt on his face from here. A mistake, to show that to so many. His mask had been ripped away, along with some of his armour. She sighed; she had tried to protect him with it. The reactions to this little incident would ripple out for years. She would have a lot of work to do.

The next morning, Rayce was awake early and even the allure of his aerial gym couldn't pull him away from the memories of the previous night. He lay on his back in the centre of the room, staring up into the branches that held no starlight behind them now. The Hunter's face had been so distraught. And he had looked at Rayce with such loathing. Was this what his people thought of him? And that ghostly girl...

Arynessa appeared from the hallway that led to their bedrooms. She was wrapped in a soft dressing gown of pale blue, and she padded toward where he lay and sat down, crossing her legs in front of her. She pulled her brother's head into her lap and stroked his soft white hair gently. He closed his eyes.

"Are you thinking about last night?" She asked him.

"I can hardly think of anything else right now, sister. What did I do to that Hunter?" Her fingers in his hair felt good.

"Oh, Rayce, it wasn't your fault. It would take longer than I would like to explain it properly, but you must trust me when I tell you that the Hunter's hatred was directed at another, and you were a convenient outlet for it. Do you understand?"

Rayce said nothing.

The roots at the door flexed and Rayce sat up in a flash, startling Arynessa. Zeke slouched through and sagged back against the door as it closed and sealed itself once more. He looked surprised to see them.

His clothes were in disarray and his hair was a wild tangle, threaded through with an impromptu coronet of leaves, grass, and twigs. He cleared his throat.

"Am I up late, or are you two up early at this point? I've lost track."

Arynessa rose in a fluid motion and shook her head, heading back to her room, and they heard her door close.

Zeke looked at Rayce and gave him an exaggerated shrug. "What's on your mind, kid? You've got the same look on your face that Bael gets when it's my night to cook."

Rayce laughed easily, tension fading from his shoulders at the familiarity of Zeke.

"It's just last night. The Hunter."

Zeke nodded. "Good. I wanted to talk to you about that anyway." He gestured to the wall where Rayce's staff lay in its cradle. "Pick that up."

Confused but trusting, Rayce rose and took up his staff while Zeke finished fishing around in the inside pocket of his formal tunic for something. Then the older Shadowhunter helped himself to a practice sword, unusual since they had been training with live blades since Rayce had turned 12 and been able to bear Marks that would heal what little damage Zeke could manage to inflict on him. Zeke had been very clear that blood was the best motivator to become faster, but feather-light blade guards for Rayce's staff had been a part of the gift last year. He clipped them in place and turned to face Zeke.

A collar snapped around Rayce's neck before he could blink and Zeke pushed out at him, hard, causing him to skid across the great room floor. Rayce was still reeling in shock as turned the skid into a

roll that brought him swiftly up to his feet, facing his tutor. Zeke had already rushed at him, practice sword arcing in from the right.

Rayce reached into that part of him that shifted when he willed it and visualized himself above Zeke, ready to drop down on his shoulders and bear him to the ground.

Nothing happened.

Zeke's practice sword cracked against Rayce's side with enough force that he felt a few ribs break. He collapsed sideways, gasping, tracking Zeke's movements to see where the next blow would come from, but the Shadowhunter had already dropped his weapon and was kneeling at Rayce's side.

"I'm hoping that you're listening right now, Rayce." The boy nodded weakly, fire burning through his ribs. "You can't rely on your shadow-stepping to get yourself out of trouble every time. Someone else is going to figure out the same thing I did, and when that day comes, you're going to need to remember how to fight like the rest of us." Rayce had been tested with cold iron before and found that it had little effect on him with his mixed blood, but that had been before he had learned about his gift.

Zeke rose to grab his stele from a table strewn with smaller weapons. He sketched an iratze across the injury and then tugged the boy's nightshirt back into place. Rayce's breathing slowly eased as the healing rune must have faded and he nodded at Zeke.

His hands reached up to feel the collar that Zeke had snapped around his neck, and the older Shadowhunter leaned over to undo the clasp and hand the whole thing to Rayce.

It was an ugly piece of twisted, cold iron, the catch designed to lock in place and vanish into the spiralling surface, making it harder to unlock if one could not see it.

"Don't let your sister see that," Zeke said, jabbing a finger at Rayce's chest. "Do you have any idea how hard it is to smuggle cold iron into the Seelie Court? If I have to put out that much effort again, it's going to be for bacon-wrapped steak, boy. We'll train with that when your brother and sister aren't around."

October 2026

"When were you going to tell me?!" Rayce hurled at Zeke, grabbing two handfuls of his tutor's shirt and slamming him up against the smooth, wooden wall of the kitchen.

Rayce had finally grown into his body and now stood taller than Zeke, just over six feet in height. Years of hard training had left his arms muscled without being bulky, his athletic frame built for speed and agility. Today it felt like it was built for murdering.

"Tell you what, boy? And you'd best remove your hands before I remove them for you."

The prince regained some control and unclenched his fists, but did not step back. "That you turned me into a prize-fighter and let me

think it was honour. That you've been lying to me for years. That my brother, my sister, and my mother have been playing me for a fool."

Inwardly, Zeke felt his heart twist. He himself had found out after that first night. He had taken Arynessa outside of the apartments and confronted her about it, and she had told him it was for the best if Rayce didn't know yet. Just a few more years, she had pleaded. And, to his shame, Zeke had agreed.

Zeke didn't answer. Couldn't.

Rayce nodded slowly and turned away, stalking toward his bedroom. When he had reached his 18th birthday last week, his mother had gifted him with the ability to finally open the apartment door and granted him freedom within the Court, though warned him against ever trying to leave.

He had hardly been home since, spending every free moment he could exploring the wonders of the Seelie Kingdom with no desire to leave the land under the hill. But he had also, at last, been free to speak to others who weren't Zeke, his sister, or Bael. And he had learned how the Court saw him. A trained pet, a tame Nephilim to kneel before the throne and draw enormous sums as his skill in combat had grown and the contest to defeat him had intensified.

All the fights over the years since the first time had suddenly made sense to him. Sometimes his opponents would request a certain set of weapons, or no weapons at all, and sometimes a time limit had been enforced, or a specific number of matches. He had been only too pleased to show off his many proficiencies, never knowing that those opponents had paid extra.

He pulled his cloak from the back of his door and tossed some clothing onto it, then bundled it closed with a belt. He threw the door open again and yanked his double-bladed staff from where it hung on the wall. The harness he wore for it was already in place, a constant part of his attire, and he crossed the great room to the front door.

"For what it's worth, we did it because we loved you," Zeke called to him. "You can't leave, Rayce. Your mother won't allow it." He was leaning against the wall by the opposite hallway, arms folded across his chest.

"She'll be too late to stop me," Rayce snapped, and then he was gone.

The Faerie lights in the tunnels came to life and faded again as he flew past them, his cloak roll tucked under one arm and his staff across his back. He had a pretty good idea of where he was going; he just had to get there before anyone could find him. In a way, it was convenient that the apartments were so far from the heart of the Court.

He quickly found himself in one of the long tunnels that led out to the Mundane world, reserved for the use of the Hunt. He smell the change in the air as he raced along its length toward the exit.

Rayce was jerked off his feet as an invisible force tangled his ankles and he fell face-first into the hard-packed earth. He twisted around to see what had snared him, his staff wedged uncomfortably under him. There was nothing there.

He rolled back to his knees and tried to stand, but a shooting, fiery pain raced up his legs, cramping his muscles. He gasped out loud and tried to crawl toward the exit that stood only a stone's throw away. The burning ripped upward again and Rayce curled inward on his side, the pain so blinding that he couldn't move. He forced himself to breathe in and out, focusing on this one task as his mind raced. A trap?

With effort, he tried to coordinate his writhing to take him back closer to the Court to see if the screaming in his muscles would alleviate. It was so intense that it was impossible to tell if it was working.

Rayce had no idea how long he had laid there, cramping and burning, but stubbornly silent, before he felt a hand seize one of his wrists and start dragging him. Whoever it was didn't seem to care one way or another about being gentle.

When he could unclench his eyes, he looked up to see a vaguely familiar face staring down at him. Long, pale green hair swished back and forth as she continued to drag him, her gold eyes filled with amusement. Kylea. Another of his sisters, though one he saw only infrequently. She served as an enforcer within the Courts, her peculiar gift for tracking blended with a streak of viciousness that begged for release.

She dropped his arm when she had judged they had come back far enough.

"I should thank you, little brother. Now I will collect on the bet that was laid against how long it would take you to run once you found out. Mother wants to see you."

Rayce's eyes flicked down the tunnel toward the Court. He could shift away from her and keep shifting until he could lose himself somewhere else.

"Oh, yes, brother. Please try to run. I so love to hunt. And I've always wondered how I would fare against you; I just never had the money to find out." Her laugh was cruel as she reached down again and hauled him up.

The Seelie Queen dismissed everyone except her handmaidens from her informal sitting room, rising from her divan that sat upon the dais and served as her seat of power here. Kylea vanished with a smirk at her brother, who stood covered in dirt, dark earth ground into his white hair from that first fall in the tunnel.

"I did warn you against leaving, my son," she said.

Rayce glowered up at her. "I won't fight anymore. You won't make another penny off me, mother."

The Queen descended slowly, the green of her gown so dark it was nearly black. Her hair was unbound and it fell wildly from beneath

her crown, spilling over her shoulders and down her back. Quiet menace dripped from her smile as her lips curved upward.

"Well that's me done, then, isn't it? Very clever, Rayce." She stood now before him, eyes sparkling. "Unless I've already thought of that uncreative response."

His jaw ached from clenching it so tightly. His hands flexed at his sides. If his mother took note of the fury that was welling up in her son, she gave no sign.

"You'll continue to fight, and you will fight well. Losing will go very poorly for your beloved Zeke."

Rayce felt a hollow pit open in his stomach. Zeke.

"You see, son, he is also bound to this Court by the mistakes he made when he first came, although regrettably, not to me. He has nowhere to run. You have no idea what price I could fetch for an hour to torture him, and I would see to it that the hours were endless." She paused to make sure he was absorbing her words.

A tear betrayed him, sliding down his cheek. The Queen reached up with one delicate hand and touched it, then put her finger to her lips.

"Our arrangement will continue as before, my son." She turned around, dismissal clear, and he had no choice but to leave, wrenching open the heavily-carved door and rushing past the guards before they could see his face.

He couldn't tell Zeke. The older Shadowhunter might try to do something drastic to himself or others to free Rayce from the Court, and it couldn't be risked.

He crossed through a cavern where a spring bubbled up and fresh water rushed away along carved channels in the floor. He cleaned away as much of the dirt as possible and rinsed it from his hair. A shirt from his bundle served well enough to dry him off and he stuffed it back into the lump after wiping down his weapon.

Trapped, he thought. He gathered up all of the despair and sadness that threatened to overwhelm him and crushed it down into a tiny ball inside him. Bael had been unknowingly training him for this moment his entire life. Rayce carefully locked away all the hurt and every part of him that was screaming at him to stop. He had a part to play, now, and the consequences of failure would be Zeke's to pay. He wouldn't allow it.

When he stood again, he was calm. Cooler, more distant. Part of the boy that he had been had died today, but Rayce would remember why.

It wasn't long before he was pressing his hand against the dark wood next to the apartment door. He took a deep breath and pushed his way in.

"Rayce!" Arynessa flew across the distance between them and threw her arms around his neck. His right hand came up to gently rest on her back and he buried his face in her hair, eyes turning to find

Zeke.

His tutor was watching him with hard eyes. "Changed your mind, boy?"

Arynessa released him and stepped back. Before he had locked away that other part of himself, his heart might have ached to look down into her violet eyes and lie, but no more. He got the feeling that this would be the first in a long line of lies he would tell, his half-Faerie nature allowing him to circumvent the truth.

He smiled easily, dimples creasing the corners of his mouth and his eyes lit up, already allowing his face to lie as Bael had taught him.

"Everything's fine."

**Author's note: The physical description and name for the character of Kylea was submitted by Stiles Salvatore and was chosen to appear in this story with her permission.

6. Chapter 5

** 5**

July 2033

Rayce woke with a start. He had been having such a vivid dream. He laid tangled in his sheets and closed his eyes, trying to hold on to the memory of it. There had been a girl with shining hair woven from strands of precious metals, a blazing seraph blade held in one hand and... the dream was draining away like water through his fingers. He rolled over on his stomach and buried his head under his pillow, pulling desperately at the unravelling threads of what he had seen. Something important. A warning?

Sighing with exasperation, he pushed his hands under his bare chest and flexed, raising himself up and the sheet slid down the supple muscles of his back. He knelt in the centre of his bed for one more moment, taking one last stab at even a flash of what he had seen. Nothing. She had felt so familiar.

Rayce slipped out of his bed and pulled on a dark robe, belting it absentmindedly. He was so preoccupied with his thoughts as he moved silently down the hallway to the great room that he almost didn't hear the voices. Pulling up just shy of the doorway, he peered around the corner.

Zeke stood at the door of the apartment speaking softly to someone hidden in the tunnel beyond. He was shaking his head and it sounded like he might have been arguing with whoever was out there. After a few more moments, Zeke sighed, nodded, and closed the door gently. The familiar roots reached back into the door to lock it once more.

Rayce ducked back behind the edge of the hallway, but not before he had seen Zeke holding what looked like a letter. He stood with his back pressed against the wall and considered his options. It was highly unusual to have any visitor out here on the edge of the Seelie

Court, but to have one come in secret in the dead of night was stranger still. What was in the letter? On the other hand, it wasn't his business. If they had wanted to speak to Rayce, Zeke would have woken him.

He struggled internally for another moment and then saw Zeke's shadow cross the light and cast itself down the hallway at Rayce's feet. He jerked forward and tried to look like he had just left his room, rubbing his eyes for extra effect.

He yawned theatrically for Zeke's benefit as he rounded the corner.
"You're up late."

Zeke searched Rayce's eyes but could find no hint of deception there. He relaxed infinitesimally and nodded. "Old men don't sleep like you do, kid." He passed by Rayce and went into his own bedroom, closing the door gently behind him.

Rayce considered going back to his room or knocking on Zeke's door, but he doubted he could sleep now and he had already decided not to pry. He continued with his original plan and headed to the kitchen area to brew a pot of tea.

As the water boiled, Rayce unconsciously ran his hands back through his thick white locks. They were well past his ears; he really should get Arynessa to give him a trim the next time she came by. She had been home less and less frequently over the last year, but he figured that since he was certainly a grown man now, she felt less of an obligation to look after him.

The kettle started whistling quietly and he took it off the heat before it could build up to a shriek. He poured the water into a well-worn pot and tossed some leaves in an infuser to steep. He settled himself into one of the chairs around the table to wait and he let his eyes travel around the room, taking in everyday things that he normally wouldn't have noticed, but that seemed to jump out at him in the middle of the night.

The edges of the table had been worn smooth by nearly 25 years of elbows and forearms. The teapot had probably served thousands of cups of tea to himself, his siblings and Zeke. How many hours had they spent sitting here laughing, talking, and arguing? He was feeling strangely nostalgic and wistful. It felt like there was a change coming, but he put it down to the unease he was feeling from his dream. If only he could remember!

He couldn't sit here.

Rayce pushed back from the table and returned to the great room. He took up his staff from the wall, closing his strong hands around the haft and sighing. He always felt more complete with it. It was entirely unique in its craftsmanship, if not in its design. The staff was made from rare steelwood, a tree that was grown over deposits of iron, nickle, manganese, and vanadium, and fertilized with dustings of coal. Strong Faerie magic was woven into the steelwood tree as it grew, forcing the tree to draw traces of the metals up through its roots over the years until the entire tree was infused with the strength of the minerals and the magic tempered it into living steel.

There were very few Seelie artisans who had the skill to work with steelwood, but his mother had found the best of them and commissioned the staff for his 13th birthday. A limb had been cut from the steelwood tree and then shaped to accept the custom blades. A Seelie smith had eagerly accepted the job, fusing identical blades of adamas and electrum together seamlessly for each end. The Iron Sisters may have thought they were alone in working the holy material, but Faeries held the blood of Heaven in their veins as well, and could shape adamas without the seraphic runes the Sisters used. The blades held no runic magic, but it was heavily buttressed by Fey power.

Pure silver scroll-work done in the finest hand was laid into each side of both blades so that he could strike with the combined power of adamas, electrum and silver. Magic had been used to seal the blades against damage and wearing. It would never need to be sharpened. When his mother had been presented with the finished weapon she had held it lightly in her slim hands, eyes wondering. In all of her centuries on the Seelie throne, she had never seen its like.

She had kept the weapon for three days, siphoning earth magic into the haft to prepare it for the final step. Rayce had been called to her apartments to receive his gift, and she had bidden him to take hold of it so that she could wrap her hands around his.

The air had seemed to warp as she drew down power and created a bond between him and the staff.

It is made from living steel, my son. You will find that it will obey its master, she had said to him. She had staggered backward a step when she released his hands, temporarily drained from the effort of the bonding.

Rayce looked down at it now, the ends uncapped by the guards that saved Zeke from rather a lot of unnecessary shaving. The steelwood was warm in his hands and he reached for the bond with his mind. The staff obeyed his command and split smoothly into two halves, the wood rippling under his grip to form pseudo-hilts. He breathed easily and crouched down a bit to leap up into the boughs overhead. They had aged with him and were familiar friends by now.

The twin halves of his staff looped around him as he spun and twisted above the floor of the great room, reversing his grip and then righting it again, feet gliding over the limbs of the trees as he fought a half dozen foes in his imagination. Dodging and dipping to avoid their strikes, he leaped from branch to branch before dropping back to the floor and fusing the two halves of his weapon back into one smooth length again. The staff whirled and sliced in a deadly dance.

In the blurs of his spinning blades, Rayce again saw the girl from his dream. He pushed harder against his phantasmal attackers, forcing his conscious mind to focus on the invisible fight to leave his subconscious free to reach for her again. He was sweating freely now, and he could almost hear her voice calling out to him...

Rayce.

"Rayce! Slow down, boy!" Zeke's voice cut through the illusion and his concentration was shattered. Rayce stepped back almost drunkenly

and turned to look at him. It had been so intense.

Zeke crossed to the kitchen and poured two cups of the now thoroughly-steeped tea. He dunked a dish towel in the wash basin and squeezed it out before tossing it to Rayce as he came through the doorway.

The prince ran the cloth down his chest and across the back of his neck, savouring the cool touch. When he was refreshed, he sat down across from Zeke and picked up his cup.

"Is everything all right?" Rayce asked.

"I could ask you the same thing, right now. What are you doing whirling around like a mad man in the middle of the night?" Zeke took a sip and grimaced at the flavour. He rose from the table and opened one of the cupboards as Rayce answered.

"I had this dream... there was a girl..." He trailed off, still thinking about those gold eyes. Gold eyes? I remembered!

"Say no more, my boy. I've had plenty of those dreams, myself. But I don't make a habit of leaping around in trees and making tea sludge afterwards." He lifted a false bottom out of the cupboard and pulled out a bottle of brandy, adding a splash to his tea before returning it to its hiding place. Arynessa would pour it out if she found it.

Rayce shook his head but gave up trying to explain. Zeke took an experimental swig from his improved tea and made a face, but nodded. "Brandy sludge, now, I'd say."

The two sat quietly across from each other, both lost in thoughts they couldn't share with the other. Rayce stared into his tea while Zeke turned sad, grey eyes on his student. So much to say and no way to say it.

They finished their tea without speaking another word until Zeke rose and clapped a hand to Rayce's shoulder. "If it's meant to be, boy, you'll see her again."

Rayce nodded mutely and Zeke padded away, returning to his bedroom to read and reread the troubling letter he had received and pray that it was false.

Later on that evening when he rose from his bed once more after an afternoon of troubling dreams, Rayce found Baelerithon working in the small study where he had taught lessons for the last two decades.

"Bael! I haven't seen you in weeks!" Rayce smiled as his brother rose to embrace him.

"I regret it, brother. I have been away and sorely missed your company; I would have had a much easier time if I had been able to have you at my side." He settled back into the desk chair and Rayce took the seat opposite from him by force of habit.

"Trouble?" Rayce questioned, raising an eyebrow.

Baelerithon shook his head. "Nothing I can't handle. The Unseelie Court stirs and whispers reach us even here. I journeyed there to protect the Seelie throne and strengthen diplomatic ties. I believe I fared well."

Rayce nodded in understanding. His brother had been formally named as Crown Prince of the Seelie throne a few years ago as a precaution, though Rayce could hardly believe that the Seelie line of succession had not been solidified centuries earlier. That their mother even had cause for concern was worrying in and of itself.

Baelerithon seemed to catch Rayce's sombre mood. "I don't think you have anything to worry about, little brother. Let your heart rest and be at ease." He reached across to muss Rayce's hair as he had done years ago.

Rayce laughed and shook his head, finger-brushing back through his hair to restore it to its casually-tousled state.

"If you say so, Bael."

"I do." Baelerithon rose once more from the desk chair and shuffled pages of his elegant script into a satchel that lay on the floor. "I think it's past time that I went to see mother. Perhaps you and I might share supper tonight?"

"Of course," Rayce answered, following his brother out to the great room and holding the door as he left the apartments, black-feathered wings vanishing into the fading Faerie light down the tunnel.

Zeke shuffled out of his room in his tatty white robe that gave Arynessa fits after Baelerithon had left, and he helped himself to a banana, chewing slowly as he walked down one wall of weapons, looking over each one. He buckled on a pair of twin swords over his robe and pocketed a handful of throwing knives. He seemed to be in a very odd mood. Rayce felt distinctly creeped out.

With no warning, Zeke dropped the banana and fell to the floor, clutching at his chest.

"Zeke!" The younger Shadowhunter flew to his side and knelt down, his left hand on Zeke's shoulder. "What's wrong?"

His tutor shuddered and forced himself to rise, breathing hard.

"No time, Rayce." He darted back to his room and picked up an unfamiliar pack, thrusting it at Rayce hurriedly when he returned. He scooped up the beautiful, bladed staff and threw it to Rayce, hurrying to the door and unlocking it. "Come on!"

"Zeke, wait! What are you doing?"

"Just trust me," he begged, holding the door open. Rayce didn't ask again.

The two of them hurried through the tunnels, Zeke's robe flapping behind him as he practically ran ahead of Rayce in carpet slippers. Arynessa would be horrified to see him in public like this, but they didn't pass anyone in these nearly deserted corridors.

They took a familiar turn and Rayce slowed, recognizing the Hunter's tunnel that led out into the Mundane world. Zeke heard him fall back and turned.

"Come on, boy. All of that is in the past now. You can't afford to tarry." He took a hold of Rayce's arm and steered him forward. They drew closer and closer to the exit and Rayce tensed involuntarily, waiting for the searing fire to race up his legs and twist his muscles into knots once more. But he continued forward unharmed.

When they were standing at the exit hatch, Zeke turned around to face his student in the dimness of the tunnel, the closest Faerie light several feet away and only glowing faintly with them standing at a distance.

"Listen to me," he said quickly, his breathing harsh and seemingly laboured. How can he be winded already, Rayce thought. "Something's happened. I don't know all the details, but I know that you have to leave before anyone comes looking for you. Your mother's hold over you is broken now, and your life depends on you taking this path to the Mundane world."

"Zeke, I don't understand. What's happened?" Rayce readjusted the strap of the pack on his shoulder, hitching it up. Come to think of it, how had Zeke known to have a pack ready?

Zeke sighed and took hold of the latch to shove it open. Bright orange light intruded into the tunnel and artificially illuminated his face properly for the first time since fleeing from the apartments. Rayce gasped.

His tutor's hair had gone completely grey. His skin had paled, and sagged around his jaw now. Once-broad shoulders had shrunk in on him and a gut now strained at the belt of his tattered robe. His fingers were gnarled and bent with arthritis as he reached out to take Rayce's shoulders in his spotted hands.

"Your mother is dead, Rayce. I don't know how or why, but the moment she passed from this life her gift to me was revoked, the magic broken, just as it was with the tether that bound you to the Court. I'm still trapped here through my own foolish mistakes, but you aren't. You have to run, boy, before whoever did this comes looking for you."

Rayce was numb with shock. His mother, dead? Impossible. "Why would anyone come looking for me, Zeke?"

"You still don't see yourself very clearly, Rayce, but others do. You're a weapon of incalculable value, and an unpredictable piece on the chess board of this Court. You need to be courted or killed, and your enemies will see no other option."

"How could you know all of this, Zeke? What aren't you telling me?" Rayce's deep green eyes pleaded with the old man stooped in front of him.

"You'll know as much as I do when you read the letter in your pack, boy. Someone's looking out for you, and I pray by the Angel that they find you before anyone else does. Fac fortis et patere. Go,

now!"

In the distance, Faerie lights were flickering to life, illuminating the swift shadows that ran through them.

Zeke's eyes widened in horror and he practically shoved Rayce through the door, his frail body a ruin of the proud warrior that had shared tea sludge with his student the night before.

He slammed the door closed behind Rayce and threw the latch, locking him out in the Mundane world. He turned to face the approaching shadows and rolled up the baggy sleeves of his bathrobe. The carpet slippers were discarded and he drew one of the twin swords, his hand aching as he clutched the hilt. His other hand produced three of the throwing knives, and he palmed them quietly. Pain flared across his shoulders and through his knees, the bitter price of his body ageing nearly 40 years in only a few minutes. He'd had over two decades of stolen time with Rayce, though, and it was a price worth paying, even with Arynessa and Baelerithon thrown in the balance.

The shadows were only a few lights away now, and Zeke could make out Kylea's long green hair in the glow, two of her cronies flanking her. She slowed as she approached the last light in the tunnel.

"Who are you?" She seemed genuinely confused.

"Just a crazy old man in a bathrobe, bitch," Zeke threw the first of his knives at the Faerie light, shattering it as he rushed forward into the enforcers. He bowled one over and slashed at the other wildly, breaking through their line and hurling his second and third blade at each of the next two closest lights. He missed the far one.
Ah well, two out of three is pretty good for a geezer like me.

He turned back to the Fey behind him and moved in to press the shred of advantage he still possessed from his surprise attack in the near darkness. The second of the twin swords appeared in his hand and he waded forward into the enforcer on the right, both blades arcing for a swift kill to even the numbers quickly.

The Faerie managed to parry Zeke's right-hand blow, but the blade in his left hand sank deep into the fighter's side, catching on a rib, and Zeke released it quickly to avoid becoming entangled. Only years of experience and a quiet sixth sense warned him of the blade driving at his back, and he dove aside to avoid the killing blow. He rolled over in the dirt, joints flaring angrily with pain. He was slow rising to his feet as his knees protested, and only narrowly parried the incoming strike. He grappled with his attacker and turned him around to slam his back against the wall. He pinned one of the Faerie's arms with his own and swiftly drove the short sword up through the enforcer's gut.

Orange light flickered behind him and he panicked for a moment, thinking that Kylea had left to pursue Rayce, leaving the old man to her cronies, but when he spun around he saw that she had drawn a pair of black batons and they were glowing wickedly as she advanced.

She sprang forward with the speed of a striking snake and he didn't have time to raise a guard. One baton slammed into his hip and fiery pain choked a scream out of him. The other baton cracked down across his collarbone and he sank to the hard-packed earthen floor, grateful

to black out before Kylea could go to work on him.

Arynessa was returning from a pleasant meeting with several courtiers when she heard screams rise from the throne room. Wailing and keening accompanied it, and she paused to think for a moment. Only a fool would run toward it to stare. Better to reach safety and learn more from a distance. She turned around and darted back along the corridors, breaking away from the heart of the Seelie Court.

The farther away she got from the throne room the quieter it became, and no one else was running as she was, but she did not slow. A heavy feeling had settled in her heart. Well did she know when the screams coming from the court room were a result of her mother's hand, but this was something else.

Blue-white light blazed ahead as she reached the ley line terminus. There was no queue today, and she quickly ran up the steps to the platform and crossed into the flow. She flashed away in the blink of an eye and when she had reached her destination, she appeared on another platform far from everything else. Behind her, the ley line magic flared once sharply and then went dark. Someone had clamped down the power, and she had only just reached safety in time. Arynessa shivered when she thought about what this kind of attack could mean.

Inside the throne room, Baelerithon was backed up against the steps that led up to the Seelie throne. His mother's body was sprawled across it, one hand trailing down to almost brush against the dais, her hair spilling over one armrest like a waterfall made of flames. Advancing slowly toward him was a monstrous Faerie.

He was powerfully built, deep-purple flesh stretched over corded muscles left uncovered save for eerily-glowing green runes of dark magic. Great, curving ram horns grew from his forehead, stretching his height to nearly nine feet. Matted fur covered his legs down to where his feet ended in cloven hooves. The giant Faerie flared out wide, tattered leather wings that were dotted with holes where he had been injured in battles over the centuries. Acid-green eyes glowed out of a cruel face with a hard jaw as he raised his hand to point at Baelerithon.

"Prince Baelerithon," his voice oozed darkly past teeth filed to points. "Just the man I was hoping to find." His lips pulled up in an imitation of a smile, but there was no mirth there.

Lithe shadows were fanning out through the room and more screams rose as the Unseelie warriors sought to capture as many of the Seelie heirs as they could. Many ran for the exits; some were fast enough, and might stand a chance in the confusing tunnels of their homeland. Others were captured and bound.

Baelerithon was helpless to intervene, and his eyes were awash with anguish as he saw two of his siblings cut down as they attempted to fight off the Unseelie Fey. It was over in less than a minute. Sorrow was stamped across his face as four of the invaders climbed the steps to seize his arms and pinion his wings. They led him away through the doorway to the left side of the throne.

The giant Fey turned to survey the survivors in the throne room with satisfaction. Nearly flawless.

A small shadow slipped up beside him and solidified into Taerynia, his faithful lieutenant. She dipped her head in a slight bow, electric blue hair falling in straight sheets to her shoulders, only her pale face visible through the red-streaked black armour that she wore.

"My Lord Malchezed, the ley line terminus has been shut down. The exits are sealed. The faithful are hunting for survivors and strays in the tunnels." She lowered her black eyes again.

Malchezed's voice was low and laced with menace when he responded, "I want a census of the missing, Taerynia. They will be hunted."

7. Chapter 6

_ ** 6 ** _

The door to the Hunter's passage slammed shut behind Rayce as he stumbled forward, and he whirled around to break it down. A blank concrete wall stared back at him with no hint of a doorway.

"No. No!" Rayce pounded his fists against the smooth surface and then flattened his hands, feeling for a seam, a hidden trigger, anything that might let him get back to Zeke. He felt nothing but mounting fear for his tutor.

He stepped back, tears of frustration threatening to spill over, and he worked to steady his breathing. Above him, an orange light cast its glow disinterestedly down on him, cutting through the darkness. He appeared to be in some sort of alleyway in the Mundane world. As he roughly forced his mind to quiet its rising panic, he recalled one of Bael's lectures about the Wild Hunt. Their entrances into the Courts could only be opened by one of those who rode the wild winds of the skies and owed their allegiance to the Hunt. There would be no way back to the Court for him from here. But how long did Zeke have?

Dread settled heavily into Rayce's stomach as he was faced with the enormity of the task ahead of him. He didn't know the Mundane world. He didn't know where to find another entrance. And he didn't know what had happened to his family. His breathing accelerated again as he looked around the alley as if searching for answers amid the trash. The faint scent of feline urine wafted from the opposite wall. To his right, the alley was dark. To his left, it opened onto a street. It was concrete and brick everywhere. He felt sick. He sank down with his back against the wall and ducked his head between his knees. This wasn't happening. This wasn't real.

Rayce lost track of the time as he sat there trying to think of what he could do to get back to the Court. Bitter laughter escaped his lips as he realized he that had spent the last seven years wishing he could leave, and now all he wanted was to get back. Zeke's parting words echoed in his mind, *_fac fortis et patere. Do brave deeds and endure.* He'd been telling Rayce that since he was eight years old and he had first discovered his ability. His hands tightened as he imagined what Zeke may be enduring even now. What would Zeke think of him feeling sorry for himself in an alley?

Light blazed from the darkness deeper in the alley as a monstrous truck roared to life, engine coughing and barking before catching. Rayce was caught in its headlights and he threw up his hand to shield his eyes from the glare. He scrambled to his feet as the truck rolled forward and he snatched up the pack Zeke had given him. The alley was narrow, and he slipped backwards, closer to the street. He would have to leave.

Baelerithon had given him an understanding of Mundanes and their lifestyle, but hearing about it, seeing a few hand-drawn sketches as they talked over the desk in the study, could not compare to the enormity of what he was seeing now. Great glass towers stretched up into the night sky overhead and vehicles were parked bumper to bumper on both sides of the street. Mundanes walked quickly along the sidewalks, alone or in groups, talking loudly to each other, or seemingly to themselves. A street sign proclaimed this to be Grand Trunk Crescent, but it didn't feel grand at all, and if a great tree had lent its name to the street once, the trunk was long gone.

A Mundane woman caught sight of him and slowed, her mouth falling open. He wore the loose-fitting dark clothing that he often wore at home for training. His shock of white hair occasioned little comment in the Courts, where it was just as likely to see greens and blues clashing with pinks and purples, but here it seemed to set him apart. Even just his physical stature drew the eye, strongly built and well-formed. He met the Mundane's eyes with his own piercing green gaze and he watched in amazement as her eyes rolled up and she collapsed onto the concrete.

Part of him wanted to run, but he felt badly about the Mundane. He crossed the distance that separated them and knelt down, working one of his arms under her knees and the other behind her neck.

"Hey, mister! Get away from her!" Rayce threw a glance back over his shoulder and found a dark-skinned male youth approaching him cautiously. He sighed quietly, but left the woman where she was. He rose and turned to face the teenager, hands held up non-threateningly.

"The lady collapsed. I was only concerned for her welfare and did not wish to leave her laying in the walkway, friend. I meant no harm."

The boy's eyes were locked on something over Rayce's shoulder, though, and it didn't seem as though he had even heard the apology.

"Are you some kinda cosplayer, man? That's a pretty awesome looking staff. Can I take a selfie with you?" Inwardly, Rayce groaned. This was more than he had bargained for, and now he was wondering if a cosplayer was what Mundanes called Faeries here.

Before he could respond, a handful of shadows detached themselves from the mouth of the alley where Rayce had emerged, led by a tall figure with long green hair. His eyes widened. Kylea. The youth saw Rayce's reaction and turned around to see what was behind him that could cause so much horror.

Rayce whipped his staff over his shoulder in half a heartbeat, thrusting his arm through the second strap of the pack, and shifted

forward, placing himself between the shadows and the boy. He heard a low exclamation of, "Awesome!" behind him as he moved to intercept his pursuers.

"Brother," Kylea hissed with pleasure. The shadows at her sides twisted and shifted, sometimes taking form long enough for Rayce to recognize Unseelie assassins for what they were. What would they be doing with his sister? She flicked her wrists, her trademark batons snapping into her waiting hands. Rayce could see streaks of blood in the orange glow of their enchantment.

Some of the shadow assassins slipped behind Rayce, and his sister fell back a few paces, letting them surround him. He had never faced so many like this before. From opposite sides, two of the Unseelie shadows slashed forward with long whips that crackled with dark-purple energy. He brought up the steelwood staff and whirled it quickly, catching the lashes with the shaft and spinning to yank them from their owners' grips.

Shooting pain raced up his hands from the staff and he was blasted backwards off his feet, magic sparking like electricity and causing his muscles to jerk wildly. The youth was still standing on the sidewalk, holding up a small black device that looked like a Sensor and was aiming it at Rayce. Searching for demonic activity? Now? He used his backwards momentum to continue propelling himself farther away from the circle of enemies, breaking away even faster as he regained his feet and balance.

The pack bounced along against his back as he ran toward the busier street ahead, and he barely spared a glance upward at the massive tower that rose up in front of him. Signs reading 'C.N. Tower' pointed in its direction. He ran flat-out into the line of cars, staff still gripped in his right hand, and he vaulted over the first vehicle in his path. Mid-jump, he shifted forward to clear the next three lanes of traffic, moving straight ahead toward a cavern marked as 'Parking'.

Rayce ducked under a bar and burst into Parking, eyes searching left and right for somewhere to lose his pursuers. He shifted forward dozens of times to create more of a lead on them and to make it more difficult for them to track him. The realm of Parking descended deeper into the earth and he followed the twisting ramps in fits and starts. Perhaps an entrance back to the Courts could be found down here.

A whip cracked through the air and Rayce felt its length wrap around his throat, coiling many times, and his hands flew to it automatically. No shock followed, and he gathered himself to shift away from the hold, still searching for his attacker. How did they catch up so quickly!

Nothing happened. Zeke had trained him extensively to revert back to a regular fighting style if his gift was disabled, and he dropped his staff to lock one hand onto the leading edge of the whip, pulling it toward him viciously to bring his attacker in range.

"Fac fortis et patere!" A female voice cried as his hands closed around her throat. He stopped in amazement.

A woman stood before him, one hand clutching the handle of her whip

in a white-knuckled grip, the other clapped over his own to prevent him from crushing her windpipe. Her long, wavy black hair was pulled back and tied loosely, and wide brown eyes were filled with fear as she repeated, "Fac fortis et patere."

Zeke's words rocked him. How did this girl know?

"Who are you?" He whispered hoarsely, loosening his hold slightly.

"I'm the one who got a letter to your tutor so that he could help you escape. He gave me those words to say so that you would trust me. We don't have a lot of time before those shadows catch up; we need to move."

Rayce switched his hands from her throat to his own, tugging at the whip cord. His fingers came away flaked with a sticky film of dust.

"What is this?" He wiped his hands gingerly on his pants, then leaned over to scoop up his staff and clip it back into place on his harness under the pack.

"A bit of cold iron pulverized into a powder and mixed with some adhesive solution. I had to make sure I could catch you long enough to get you to listen."

Rayce wondered at that silently. As far as he knew, only he and Zeke knew about that loophole in his ability.

She gave her whip handle a shake and the length of it retracted swiftly so that she could hang it from the rear loop of the weapons belt she was wearing. The back of her black leather jacket just managed to cover the belt, if not what was dangling from it. He recognized the thin tubes of dormant seraph blades. A Shadowhunter.

"Do you have a name?" He asked.

Her dark eyes found his green ones and she nodded. "I'm Sera."

She turned around and swiftly darted past a few pillars marked with '2B', motioning him to follow, and then they were slipping through a door into a brightly-lit stairwell. Sera ran up the stairs, leather-clad legs pumping smoothly as she took them two at a time, flying around the landings with her left hand on the rail. Rayce tried to shift again, but there was likely too much of the iron still stuck to his neck and hands for him to manage. Looks like he would be running, too.

They emerged from the stairwell and Sera charged down the lane toward the same entrance that Rayce had come through minutes earlier. His eyes flicked around, seeking out the shadows that would conceal any Unseelie assassins, but nothing moved.

"It's okay, they're below us right now," Sera called over her shoulder, reaching the exit and jumping over the barrier. Rayce followed, utterly confused at her confidence in evading pursuit.

She turned right and kept on running at full tilt. She probably had

fresh speed runes, but Rayce didn't have that luxury, and he had to push himself hard to keep up. A great highway ran across an overpass, and the intersection below was a snarl of red lights, green lights, headlights, brake lights, and honking horns as cars tried to edge around black and orange cones. Rayce was overwhelmed by the noise and confusion. He felt a flush of gratitude to Sera as they dashed between two cars, narrowly avoiding being crushed by careless drivers. She seemed to know where she was going.

More towers of glass rose into the sky on either side of them, lights dotting the windows here and there and Rayce wondered if they were anything like the demon towers of Alicante. Rayce could hear Mundanes calling insults after them as they shoved through the crowd of milling pedestrians waiting to cross at the next intersection. Sera ignored the signal lights and flew across the pavement without even looking. He unconsciously copied every move she made, wary of a single misstep.

They were on a pathway paved with interlocking bricks now, and there were no more cars to contend with. Rayce read the words 'Harbourfront Centre' on the building to his right as they passed by in a blur of speed. Sera made a sharp right and yanked on the handle of a bright blue door, holding it open for Rayce to duck inside. She closed the door behind them and sank back against it, breathing hard.

"Wait here, 97 seconds." She squeezed a device around her wrist and it beeped. Seconds started counting on the face of the instrument.

"What happens in 97 seconds?"

"We hope that everything keeps working." She let her head fall back against the door and she scrunched her eyes shut.

Rayce crouched down next to her. "I don't mean to sound ungrateful, but I would really love to know what's going on."

Her expression softened and she looked at him, then nodded understandingly. "I know, Rayce, and I promise that I'm going to explain. But right now I really need to concentrate." She closed her eyes again.

The seconds ticked away.

Sera's head suddenly jerked up and her eyes flicked open in surprise. Did she fall asleep, Rayce wondered.

"Damn. Come on!" She bounced back up to her feet, boots already pounding along the corridor to another set of stairs. They ran upward together, and after only two flights they stood before a ladder that led up to what was presumably the roof access.

Sera practically ran up the ladder and slapped her palm against the access hatch. She must have hit it harder than Rayce thought, because it blew open, clanging backwards loudly, the night sky open above them. She hopped off the ladder to clear the way for him and then flipped the hatch back over, her hands shoving it down with extra force. As Rayce turned to follow her, he could almost have sworn that there was a dark imprint of a rune on the hatch. Is this a Nephilim stronghold?

Sera had her back to the east wall and was looking at the edge of the roof intently. She held out her left hand to Rayce. He took it without questioning, watching as her head nodded in time to some internal clock. "Now!"

She sprinted forward, pulling Rayce with her. Right off the edge. He didn't have time to even gasp as he leaped blindly out into the night, but he had his breath knocked out of him as his feet touched down on the roof of a tall truck that was struggling to get through the narrow corridor to make a delivery. Sera didn't pause, taking a quick double step before launching them off the truck toward the two-storey glass building across from where they had been. She let go of his hand in mid-air so they could both grab hold of the edge as they came up short on the jump, feet slamming into the glass. They each pulled themselves over and Rayce backed away from the edge.

"This isn't possib—" Sera took his hand again and pulled him across the rooftop, running south along the edge of the glass panels. The building curved away to their right, where they made the transition to an older-looking brick section. A tall chimney stack rose from the roof and Lake Ontario was a dark silhouette to the north. Sera knelt down at the edge of the building and took hold of the lip in both hands, lowering herself over the side, and then she let go, dropping lightly to the ground far below. Rayce shook his head in amazement and copied her movements, landing next to her in a cat-like crouch. She pointed at an eight-storey building across from them, where a covered stairway climbed halfway up the side like an elongated snake.

They dashed across the distance between the two buildings and hurtled around the corner of the staircase. Sera made a slight adjustment just before turning and managed to miss crashing into two men dressed in expensive-looking suits. No sooner had they turned to stare at the girl who had flown by than Rayce barrelled around the corner, knocking all three of them to the ground. He untangled himself from the mess of arms and legs while they all tried to apologize at once. Sera pulled him free and shouted her own apology before pulling Rayce along up the steps.

The door at the top took them inside the building, which was mercifully empty of people so far with the late hour. Sera slowed a bit, eyes unfocused and Rayce slowed with her.

"It's okay, they didn't see us," she said, out of breath from the run up the stairs, "And they are so confused because of the roof thing. We have a bit of a lead again."

They set off at a jog to the end of the corridor, banging through the stairwell door and descending back to ground level. Hurrying past darkened shopfronts, they exited through glass doors marked with a stylized 'Q' and hopped down the four steps that led back to the sidewalk. Pleasure boats were tied up for the night at the stone quay just a few feet ahead, and across the water twin glass towers rose, connected by a glass bridge between the sixth and eighth floors.

"That's where we're trying to get," Sera said, pointing at the towers. Rayce nodded in response.

A few Mundanes were strolling along the quay or sitting on benches, watching the water and enjoying the mild evening air. Sera tossed her head impatiently and then turned to face Rayce, her hand sliding up from his hand to his forearm, squeezing gently.

Her eyes searched his for any reaction, but he only looked back at her steadily.

"Stay close and trust me," she said, using her right hand to rub the back of her left shoulder for a moment.

The corner of Rayce's mouth quirked up, and a dimple appeared. "That's what I've been doing, Sera." She flashed him a crooked smile and then turned to stride down the quay, Rayce at her heels. This time, no Mundanes took note of them, and Sera stopped next to a long, sleek craft with The Lunaveon scrolled across the stern in gold letters.

She leaped lightly into the back, pulling on a lever to release one of the jet skis from the on-board dock. It drifted backwards a bit and she straddled the seat, firing up the engine, and then she nodded at Rayce to hop on. He shook his head to himself and scooted up behind her, hesitantly placing his hands on her waist. Sera stiffened for a moment, then reached down and pulled his arms closer around her, backing away slowly from the yacht. She turned the handle bars and gave it a bit of power. The Mundanes were still blissfully unaware for what was happening... but Rayce's pursuers were not.

With a screech of rage, Kylea and her Unseelie henchmen (hench-shadows?) appeared at the edge of the quay.

Sere swore under her breath, but it was too late. Kylea had snatched a bow from one of the Unseelie and fired a single shot at the retreating jet ski. Rayce had no protection, save for the pack, and the arrow pierced him low on his right side, just over his hip. He gasped in pain and his hands gripped Sera tighter as he pulled himself closer to shield her from any further attack.

"Hold on!" She shouted at him, as if his grip could tighten any further, and she gunned the engine, shooting out around the edge of the harbour and out into the open water. Water sprayed up and splashed across Sera's face. There was a bit of tree cover near the edge of the quay, and the hunters lost sight of their prey.

Sera maintained their speed a bit longer to keep up the illusion that they were going much farther than they were, then cut back on the throttle and guided the jet ski back in toward the shore. She let it idle and tried to turn to see Rayce's injury.

"It's alright," he said, his right hand moving down to feel the end of the Elf-bolt protruding from his side. Pain shot through him, mixed with fear as he recognized it for what it was. Elf-bolts were imbued with Fey magic and poison to burrow into their victims and guarantee death.

"No, it's not alright yet, but it's going to be. Just a little longer..." Sera crept forward on the jet ski, waiting for another signal that only she could see, and Rayce steadied himself against

her with his left hand as his right gingerly held the shaft of the bolt, preventing it from digging in any farther.

She ducked low as they approached the quay, tying off to a cleat. She waited just a few seconds longer, then gently took Rayce's hand from her waist and pulled herself up over the edge. She turned back to help him and he hissed with pain as the jet ski rocked under their shifting weight. He managed to scramble up after Sera, his blood staining the concrete where it fell.

Sera threw his left arm across her shoulders and they hobbled forward together toward the twin glass towers they had seen from the opposite quay. They entered the north tower without a single glance from the few Mundanes who were still awake. Sera pressed the elevator call button a few times and chewed at her bottom lip nervously as the lights above the doors counted down to ground level. The bell pinged and the doors opened, and Rayce was stunned to see his reflection in the mirrors inside. He was leaning heavily on Sera now and his face was ashen and drawn with the pain. He could feel a slow heat spreading from the wound and knew that the poison was already seeping into his system. She jabbed her finger at the button for the 22nd floor and the doors closed.

"It's okay, we'll be safe now," She whispered to him.

Once the doors opened again, Sera turned them down an elegant hallway lined with cream-coloured carpet and tasteful, dark-blue wallpaper, frosted glass sconces shining cheerfully. She pulled a set of keys from an inside pocket of her leather jacket and unlocked suite 2223.

Inside, she wasted no time, shucking off Rayce's pack and unclasp his staff from the harness and leaning it against a wall in the guest bedroom. She slipped off the leather strap and then took a deep breath before gently pulling his shirt over his head. His eyes were out of focus and his head was drowsing. The poison was moving quickly.

She laid him back across the regrettably white duvet and pulled a tiny metal tin from inside a zippered pocket in her jacket. Folded hand-towels and a basin of fresh water were already on the bedside table, and she steeled herself for the next part as she helped herself to them.

Rayce's eyes were closed now and she was shocked to hear him absently humming a haunting lullaby. He wouldn't notice if she just... With one final check to make sure he wasn't paying attention, she laid her shaking hands across his taut abdomen. Swirling black runes flowed outward from each of her hands, one to slow blood loss, another to put him into a deep sleep.

The humming faded away and Sera took hold of the Elf-bolt shaft that had already burrowed in another inch while neither of them had been gripping it. She pulled it out swiftly and tossed it into the wastebasket by the door, then quickly pressed a towel to the wound as it started bleeding profusely, despite the _amissio_ rune she had applied. She held the towel in place with her knee as her bloody hands unscrewed the lid of the metal tin. A rank odour wafted up from it and she blew out through her nostrils sharply. She picked up another towel and scooped out the entire contents of the tin with it,

making a glob about the size of a robin's egg.

She pulled away the first towel that was stained scarlet now and it followed the Elf-bolt into the trash. She pressed the foul-smelling paste to Rayce's wound and then added another towel for padding over it. She unbuckled her weapons belt one-handed, shook off her whip handle and seraph blades, then slid one end under his lower back to snug it down into place and adjusted it so that she could cinch it over the towels. She breathed a bit easier and laid her hand against his ribs, bending her thoughts toward healing so that a tiny pattern of iratze's would bloom around his wound. It would start to close, sealing in a good bit of the antidote for the deadly poison so that it could begin to chase down the destructive magic.

Sera exhaled what felt like every bit of air she had ever breathed and crossed the hallway to a bathroom to wash the blood off her hands. As the pink-tinged water spiraled down the drain and she scrubbed at her wrists, she glanced up into the mirror. Dark eyes, raven hair and a face that was flushed from the adrenalin pumping through her veins looked back at her. _What a joke,_ she thought, wrenching the tap closed a bit more forcefully than was strictly necessary.

She felt the lie on her skin like an oil slick and she felt dirty. She shook her head and cranked open the taps for the shower. Sera stripped out of her jacket and kicked off her boots, throwing them out into the hall. Her black leather pants and tank top followed and then her bra and underwear. She stepped into the too-hot shower and tilted her head up to let the water run down her body, thinking about Rayce laying blissfully unconscious and unaware in the other room. She wondered for the hundredth time how she was going to explain all of this to him.

It was a long time before she got out of the shower.

8. Chapter 7

** 7**

Rayce opened his eyes slowly.

He was in a darkened room with only moonlight lending a ghostly cast to the walls. He was shirtless, his feet dangling off the bottom of a luxuriously soft, albeit macabre, bed. Blood still stained the duvet that he was laying across and memories came flooding back to him. He hesitantly touched his right side where the Elf-bolt had struck him, and he found folded-up towelling under an unfamiliar weapons belt.
Sera.

He sat up gingerly, waiting for his side to pain him, but was pleasantly surprised when it did not. Rayce considered unbuckling the belt and peeling away the impromptu dressing, but figured he might be safer leaving it in place than risking Sera's wrath if he removed it too soon.

His feet sank into plush carpet as he rose slowly and caught sight of his staff leaning up against the wall. The pack that Zeke had prepared was slumped next to it and he felt a tug of curiosity. He leaned down carefully to hook one of the straps and then sat back on

the bed, farther away from the mess of dried blood.

He untied the top and pulled out what felt like a fresh set of clothes first, bundled neatly, and set them aside for later once he had had time to clean up. The smell of fruit wafted up and he tilted the bag a bit to shed more light inside. Some _very _bruised fruit lay squashed in the bottom, and he winced at the memory of being blasted off his feet by the discharge from the Unseelie weapons. A packet of nuts had survived, though, and he idly opened it and tossed a handful in his mouth, finding that they were lightly-flavoured with fruit juice now. He couldn't recall when he had last eaten something. He pulled the last three items out and peered down into the bag. Nothing else. He held a stele, a witchlight stone, and a letter that were all now lightly fruit-flavoured as well.

Zeke had said the letter in his pack would explain their hasty flight, and Rayce eagerly unfolded it, careful not to tear the page where the fruit juice had dried. He brought the witchlight to life and was able to read the slanting scrawl of writing.

Zeke,

_I don't know you, and you don't know me, and I have no way to convince you that this isn't some game being played by an idiot Faerie. What we do have in common is Rayce. _

_I am a Shadowhunter, but not like the ones that you grew up with. The Clave doesn't know I exist, and I'd like to keep it that way for as long as I can. _

The short version of the story is that sometimes I have dreams about what may yet come to pass. I know that you'll understand that as 'seeing the future', but that's not how it works. Everyone has free will. Nothing is set.

This letter is a good example of that. I've had a dream that says the Seelie Queen is going to be murdered, and soon. When that happens, Rayce will be free to leave the Court, and it's going to be up to you to make sure that happens. I've seen flashes of what his fate will be if he doesn't get away. If he's captured, he's worse than lost. If he's killed, then I am lost.

There's a tunnel that Rayce once tried to use to escape the Court. That's the path you must take â€“ it will lead him to me, and I can protect him from those who will follow.

The choice is yours now. Whether or not you choose to believe me is what will determine Rayce's future. You can ignore this letter â€“ really, I've seen it as a possibility. But I'm begging you to take a chance on me.

Be prepared to leave at a moment's notice. It will happen swiftly, and you will know in your heart when it does.

I only ask one last thing of you if you choose to help Rayce survive: Send word through my faithful messenger, Kaelie Whitewillow, and tell me what I can say that will stop Rayce from taking my head off when we meet â€“ every time I dream about that meeting without a pass phrase it doesn't end well for me.

Yours in trust,

Sera

Rayce blinked and then reread the letter. She had dreamed about his mother's death? Why had she chosen to intervene and save him? How could she have known about his failed escape attempt years earlier? And Kaelie was involved? How was that even possible? The letter had created far more questions than it had answered. He rose again with the idea of finding Sera to get a better explanation, but at that moment he heard the front door of the dwelling open.

Silent as a shadow, he crossed to the bedroom door and lifted his staff, sending a mental command to split it into two shorter pieces to manoeuvre better in close quarters. He spun out into the hall, blades held defensively, and immediately felt his entire body freeze. He tried to shift away, but found himself unable to. That powder is still all over my neck! He groaned inwardly and used a few of Zeke's more impressive expletives silently as an overhead lamp clicked on.

"Well there's a lovely fright to come home to, then, isn't it?" A small girl with a mop of black curls drawled with a faint English accent. She looked to only be in her mid-teens, and stood barely five feet tall, but Rayce took in the tufted points of cat ears buried in her dark hair and made the connection immediately: warlock. Her face was pale enough that he could see a flush bloom in her cheeks like a camellia flower slowly opening its petals as she took in his half-naked body. Her eye lashes swept down, veiling bright green eyes and she turned her head to the side.

"I'll be very pleased to free you if you'd be so kind as to promise you won't chop me up into bits, love."

Rayce felt the hold around his head loosen and he nodded. This had been a very strange night. The warlock waved her hand absently at him to undo the binding, and he was relieved to regain control of himself.

The small girl offered her hand to him, "Seraphine Lark, High Warlock of Toronto." Rayce took her hand gently in his left and then folded his right over top of hers, bowing his head deeply over their clasped hands.

"It is a pleasure to meet you, honoured daughter of Lilith," he recited stiffly, formality an easy habit that felt out of place in this situation, causing him to relax a bit before continuing, "I'm Rayce Morgenstern... but I get the feeling that you already know that somehow."

Her face split into a smile. "How perfectly charming!" She withdrew her hand, eyes searching behind him. "Where's the other Sera?"

"I haven't had a chance to go looking yet â€“ I only just woke up."

Seraphine's eyes drifted down from his again and she arched an eyebrow at him in challenge. "Princes aren't supposed to be bloody and dirty when they wake up sleeping heroines, Rayce. Perhaps a shower is in order, first."

She pointed to the door across the hall from the bedroom where he had awoken, "March."

After employing a process of elimination, Rayce had the shower running at a non-molten or glacier temperature and he carefully undid the weapons belt and lifted the messy towels away. He sucked in a breath when he saw only smooth skin underneath, no hint of a scar to mark the wound that should have killed him. Since this seemed to be a night for impossible things, he simply took it in stride and added it to the alarmingly long list of questions he needed answered. He balled up his clothes and left them in the sink, wary of the iron-laced paste that he had wiped on them when he had been cleaning his hands off earlier that night. He could do without ever encountering that again.

The shower was wonderfully restorative and he happily sluiced away the layer of grime around his neck, scrubbing hard with a marvelous sponge lathered with vanilla-scented suds. When he felt there wasn't a speck of iron or blood left anywhere he twisted the knobs and was rewarded with a blast of scalding water before turning them quickly in the opposite direction.

Muttering mutinously to himself, Rayce wrapped a towel around his waist and used another to dry his hair. He felt much better when he opened the bathroom door, allowing steam to pour out into the hallway. Seraphine poked her head around the corner, mouth open to address him, but instead she squeaked when she saw him and vanished back around the corner. A black cat tail swished after her. He shrugged helplessly and returned to the ruined bedroom, reaching for the bundle of clothes that Zeke had packed for him.

He untied the cord that bound another set of the same loose-fitting black clothes he had been wearing and gasped when a pair of white gauntlets spilled out. Emotions twisted within him. Was he even still a prince of the Courts? If he wasn't, what did that make him now? Rayce pulled on the clothes silently, lost in thought.

When he was once again properly attired, he stepped back into the hall and turned around the corner where Seraphine had retreated. He walked into a beautiful kitchen that flowed seamlessly into a stylish sitting room beyond. The cabinetry was white wood and glass, the countertops made from gleaming black marble that reflected the glow from hanging silver pendant lights above.

The High Warlock of Toronto was perched on a bar stool that was pulled up to the counter, tail flicking idly as she read a newspaper in front of her. She looked up when he entered, but seemed to have recovered her composure.

"Well, now you look a damn sight better. Please accept my apologies, but you do realize that you are a bit... stunning? It's quite a lot to be getting on with at 3:30 in the morning."

Rayce wasn't quite sure if he was supposed to apologize for being... stunning, so he changed the topic entirely.

"Is Sera well? I don't really remember what happened after we got out of the water..."

"You have a very one-track mind, love. Sera's fine, I looked in on her while you were using every last drop of hot water in this building. She's absolutely dead asleep, and if there's one bit of wisdom I can give you, it's to not wake her when she's dreaming unless it's very important."

At the mention of dreaming, Rayce's focus sharpened.

"She wrote a letter about me, about getting me away from the Seelie Court, because she said she saw my mother's murder in a dream. Do you know anything about it? How she can do that?"

"Sit down, hun, you're making me anxious," She indicated the seat next to her and then pushed back from her own, rising to bring over a tray with a teapot, a pair of teacups, milk and sugar, and a small plate of cucumber sandwiches. English hospitality was second to none, no matter the hour.

"Now, I'm not going to tell you all of Sera's secrets. That's her business, and when she's ready to tell you, she will. The dreaming thing is because of the blood that runs in her veins, and it's just as much a part of her as your poofing all over the place is a part of you, understand?"

Rayce nodded, wolfing down a cucumber sandwich without noticing. Seraphine smiled faintly and poured tea for both of them before continuing.

"Sera's gift is also a terrible burden, and she's doubled down on her misery by taking on a permanent Mnemosyne rune so that she doesn't forget her dreams. Do you know what that does to a person? Human, warlock, Nephilim, Faerie â€“ we all need to be able to forget our failures to protect us as the years pass. She carries every day on her shoulders. Sera's come a long way with her gift, and I don't judge her for how she's had to use it over the last five years.

"When Sera came to my city after her mother passed away, I felt an immediate connection to her. The similarities in our names became an amusement for us, like when you find that it seems every other boy in Alicante is named Jonathan Christopher these days," Seraphine sighed. "Parents try to give their children the names of heroes, but it's what they do that will define them. I've never met a Rayce before; your name suits you.

"Sera was very open with me, very honest. She had seen me in her dreams, and knew where to come to find me. Fortunately, she also saw what would have happened to her if she tried to lie to me. Damn shame, though â€“ sometimes I think she might have liked becoming my feline familiar. A cat that can see the future would be exceedingly useful, but only if it could talk, so I left her regrettably human," Seraphine's eyes widened. "Not that she makes a bad human... this is turning into a bit of a cock-up." She stirred her tea with tiny, precise motions.

Rayce jumped in, "So she can see the future? I didn't understand her letter; she said that it was more like seeing things that 'had not yet come to pass', and that free will was part of it."

"Free will is everything," Seraphine said, sipping from her cup. "A

better way of understanding what she does is to say that she can read chains of causality."

Rayce looked back at her blankly, blinking his deep green eyes.

Seraphine smiled apologetically. "Sorry, love, but I've been studying what she can do for years. It's easy for me to forget that I used to be just as lost as you are now."

"Chains of causality follow the lines of 'if/then' in our lives. If you eat the last cucumber sandwich then I'll have to make a decision to offer you more or berate you for your rudeness in devouring what was meant to feed two people."

Rayce looked down. She was right. The sandwiches were gone. He looked back up to her, aghast, and said, "If you decided to make more, then I wouldn't say no to eating them."

Seraphine's laugh trilled like a chime and she rose quickly, opening the refrigerator and pulling out the fixings for more sandwiches.

"To complete the explanation then, if you hadn't said that, then I wouldn't be standing up to make more now. Maybe I slice my finger while cutting up more cucumber, and it wouldn't have happened if you hadn't finished the sandwiches. Can you understand how dizzyingly connected everything can be? The more people and variables and time that you add into the mix, the more difficult it becomes to follow a chain. It's incredibly complex, and I don't understand why that girl isn't stark-raving mad by now.

"Some things are more... vibrant... when she sees them. The attitudes or beliefs or preceding events are sure enough that some outcomes are more likely than others. I'm the consummate English host, so it's not in my nature to let a guest go hungry. If Sera were to dream about this, the outcome where I got up to make more sandwiches would be much more clear and focused than the one where I found some very inventive descriptions for gluttonous half-Faeries in my kitchen.

"But the possibility remains that I could always choose the less likely scenario, and the clear vision of me as I am now, cutting up more sandwiches, would fade. Not necessarily vanish, because maybe after I was finished making you apologize in a stunning display of the finest Faerie court manners and flowery praises, I would end up making sandwiches anyway."

Rayce was rubbing his temples as Seraphine returned to her place beside him and tucked her tiny feet up under her to curl a fluffy black tail around them. "I think I'm starting to get it, but I'm not entirely sure that's a good thing. How can she stand it?"

Seraphine's expression fell and her smile faded, but she shook her head and answered softly, "You'll have to ask her."

Rayce picked up another triangle of cucumber sandwich and reflected on the events of the evening, starting to unravel how much Sera had needed to manage while they were running. Knowing when to wait and

when to run â€“ had she weighed out other scenarios where they had waited too long or run too soon? He thought about the Elf-bolt.

"I was struck by an Elf-bolt. Would that not have shown up in her dreams? Could it have been avoided?"

Seraphine slid the sandwich plate behind her, out of his reach. One lonely piece remained.

"I've seen some of Sera's notes about last night, Rayce, and please don't think that she didn't search for any possible way to prevent that from happening. Sometimes she wrenched the handlebars sideways and the arrow struck you somewhere much more vital and you died in the water. Other times she skipped the jet ski all together and you used underwater breathing runes to dive under the water and swim to the other quay, only to find some exceptionally territorial mermaids. For the record, you made out okay in that one with that face of yours, but they were a bit violently jealous of Sera and what her potential relationship with you was.

"Sera accepted that if she couldn't find a good way to stop that Elf-bolt from hitting you, she'd make sure she had the antidote to the poison and be completely prepared to deal with it once she got you up here."

"And she warned you that when you came home I'd be waiting around a corner ready to, uh, 'chop you up into little pieces', I think it was?" Rayce asked, eyeing the last bit of sandwich. He could shift just a bit...

Seraphine must have sensed his intent and popped the final triangle into her mouth.

"Mmm, 'ou reft a 'rail ov 'lood 'own 'uh 'allwa," she managed to get out around the sandwich, chewing a bit and then swallowing before she clarified, "No, you left a trail of blood down the hallway, which I had to clean up for free. I have neighbours, you know."

"I thought this was Sera's home. Is it yours?"

"Yes, though Sera comes here often to study with me. This suite is warded in just about every way possible â€“ your crazy half-sister can't track you here. For all intents and purposes, you, magically, don't exist right now."

He raised his eyebrows. "May I ask another question?"

"You just did, but I suppose I'll allow another."

He rolled his eyes, "There was a moment last night when Sera pulled us into a building and said to wait 97 seconds, and then closed her eyes. When she jerked awake she seemed surprised and we had to leave before the 97 seconds were up. What happened? Did she fall asleep for a few moments?"

"No," Seraphine shook her head. "When she's in the moment like that and she's got her inner eyes wide open, she can see a shift in events. Believe it or not, there are plenty of unlikely scenarios that she doesn't see, and if one of them pops up unexpectedly she could get a bit of notice with that trick. It's similar to how she

sees when she's fighting — just a tick ahead of her opponent. Handy, that. I'd love to watch the pair of you have a go at it."

"One day, maybe," Rayce smiled. "Thank you for the fare and conversation, but I think I need some time to understand what you've told me. I wonder, if I'm not allowed to wake her, would it be alright to just stay with her so that I may be there when she wakes? I don't think that my mind is going to be able to go back to sleep any time soon, and I doubt you would appreciate a spirited, one-sided training session in your home."

"You're absolutely right, I wouldn't." She stood and ushered him through the sitting room to a short hallway at the back of the suite. Another washroom was to the right, and a closed door presumably led to the master bedroom.

Seraphine jabbed a finger up at his chest. "You just keep your hands to yourself." Her finger flared for a moment with pink fire and he nodded quickly. The warlock returned to the kitchen and her discarded newspaper.

Rayce grasped the knob of the bedroom door and turned it silently, slipping inside and closing the door again.

Two entire walls of the bedroom were floor-to-ceiling glass, and there was a sliding door that opened out onto a wrap-around balcony with an unobstructed view of the dark lake on one side, and of the sparkling city lights on the other.

Sera was sprawled face-down across the bed diagonally, arms and legs flung out from under the white duvet and sheets. Raven hair splashed across her pillow, and her face was turned away from Rayce. There was an armchair in the corner where the two glass walls met, and he sat back in it quietly, careful not to make any noise that might wake her.

Rayce sat in silence, his mind overflowing with everything Seraphine had shared with him. He replayed the previous night in his mind over and over, feeling almost like it had happened to someone else. Sera's letter repeated itself, whispering over memories of his mother, sister, and brother. He lost track of time as he thought.

In the faint light of dawn as it broke across the sky to the east, Rayce gave himself time to grieve for Zeke, for the youth that had been snatched away so cruelly, and for whatever fate had befallen him in the tunnel after he had forced Rayce out. He let his heart mourn for the life that had been taken from him with his mother's death. Part of him even wept inwardly for her. Whatever had transpired between them, he had never wished for her death. He worried for Arynessa and Baelerithon, who would likely be hunted as he had been.

It all began and ended with the girl stretched across the bed in front of him. She was such a mystery. Everything about her made him feel confused, but alive. So very alive.

He stood up, loosening stiff muscles and turned to face the window. He had never seen a sunrise.

The sky brightened slowly, chasing the darkness into the west, forcing it to retreat from the light. When the sun broke over the horizon, its orange glow rippled across the lake all the way to the shore below him. He had never seen anything so beautiful in his life. The Faerie revels he had attended to fight for the throne had all taken place at night to better hide the Fey from unwanted eyes.

He cast his eyes back at Sera, wishing she were awake to share the moment with him. Rayce felt his face flush when he saw that she had shrugged away even more of the duvet and was only barely hanging on to her modesty. The light revealed some of her Marks, including the permanent Mnemosyne rune that Seraphine had told him about. A glamour rune stood out darkly on the back of her right shoulder.

Glamour? Rayce turned away from the sunrise to more closely inspect the rune in question. Perhaps he had mistaken it for another...?

Even as he stared, the rune began to fade rapidly, its time and power spent. As it disappeared, Sera's raven-black hair began to lighten and curl into a wild tangle of tresses. His mouth fell open in shock as platinum and silver strands shot through the gold, and bronze bloomed through her hair. He wasn't breathing.

Rayce reached out with a shaking hand to catch the edge of the sheet and draw it up slowly, his eyes wonderfully tracing the curve of her back and the delicate ridge of her shoulder blade. He swallowed as he drank in the sight of her. He could no longer tell if it was a trick of the forgotten sun that brushed her skin with the palest gold, but it was exquisite. Had he ever thought the sunrise was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen?

She stirred and Rayce dropped the edge of the sheet, reeling backwards. He fell back into the armchair with a resounding thump and nearly toppled the whole thing over.

Sera's face whipped toward him in alarm, sending a shower of molten gold hair flying as she raised herself to one elbow. Rayce already knew that her eyes would be gold, and he was shaking when her gaze pierced through him.

She pulled her eyes away and looked down to see her hair spilling across her shoulder, taking note of the colour and connecting it to the look on his face.

"Aw, crap," she whispered. Sera pulled the sheet up higher and twisted around to face him properly, sitting back against the headboard. Rayce was still having trouble stringing together two words, so he settled for one.

"Why?"

Sera smiled sadly and shook her head.

"I think we need to talk."

**Author's note: The physical description, name, and nationality for the character of Seraphine Lark was submitted by Catbug :3 and was chosen to appear in this story with permission. _

9. Chapter 8

** 8**

Sera tucked the white sheet more securely across her breasts and pushed her left hand back through her hair, silken curls tumbling back haphazardly as she drew up her right leg to help brace herself against the headboard. Rayce felt his mouth go dry, and Sera shook her head again.

"This isn't going to work very well if you can't stay coherent, Rayce."

She pressed her right palm against her left shoulder, and he had a quick glimpse of a glamour rune as she let her hand slide back down. Like water rippling from a stream, a new face slipped over her own, her hair darkening to a rich chocolate colour now, her golden eyes fading to a warm grey.

Rayce blinked at the transformation.

"I know," Sera said. "I hardly know where to begin, so I guess that's a pretty good start." She cleared her throat and played with the edge of the sheet in her lap.

"As you probably figured out last night, I am a Shadowhunter. I'm just a bit different than the ones you learned about." She looked uncomfortable as she spoke, and Rayce could feel the nervous energy in her posture.

"Seraphine told me it's because of the blood that runs in your veins, like how I'm different, too. What-, um, not that I-" Rayce broke off helplessly.

"It's okay, you can say it. What am I?" She laughed and a bit of the tension broke.

She took a deep breath, straining the sheet a bit, Rayce noticed guiltily, and began to tell her story.

Springtime had come to Alicante at last in 2010 after a long, harsh winter. Restorations to buildings damaged or destroyed during the Dark War were still underway, Unseelie artisans working day and night to complete their work. The Cold Peace had exacted a heavy price from the Fey of both Courts, and some had whispered that perhaps it had been too harsh. A world without the Faeries was a world left unbalanced. But the voices were too few and too quiet to be heard over the grief of those who had lost loved ones to Sebastian Morgenstern's Endarkened and his Faerie allies.

The Glass City had never before been a home to so many orphans, and emergency measures had been taken to assure their safety and care. They would attend the Shadowhunter Academy when they were old enough, but there were still so many who were too young. The call had gone out to interested Shadowhunters to return to Alicante and help raise and protect the next generation of Nephilim.

Meridian Chasewell had answered that call eagerly, and in less than a week she was working with two other women in an orphanage stuffed

with nearly twenty children left homeless and without guardians by the attacks. There was always an endless amount of work to be done, but Meridian and her new sisters were inspired by their charges, so the days had become months, and by now they had been together for over two years in the great canal-side home abandoned during the Dark War and seized by the Clave._

It was a clear, spring day when Meridian took several of her younger children to a park down by the canal. Clave officials had come that morning to scoop up several of the older children, though they were barely nine years old. The men had apologized, but reminded her that the world was in desperate need of Shadowhunters, and the sooner the children could begin training, the better. The children would be placed with Institutes and families all over the world so that they would not need to wait until they were 12 to begin at the Academy.

_Meri's heart had broken again, as it had each time another of the children was taken. She knew she should be happy for them to find families, but they were _hers. She_ had woken in the night to soothe their nightmares, _she_ had kissed the bumps and scrapes that came with being a child in a house filled with so many. And now the Clave had come again to take her babes._

_The sun shone down brightly on her pale blond hair as she watched the children at play, their shrieks of delight a balm for her broken heart. They were so precious. They had survived the worst disaster to ever strike at the City of Glass, and still they could laugh and love and play. _

One of the little girls ran up to her, breathless, and proudly presented her with a bouquet of dandelions. Meri's smile spread across her face like its own ray of sunshine and she reached out to gather the girl into a hug, pulling her up into her arms protectively. The girl nuzzled into her neck, tangling her fingers in the long pale strands, and Meri tilted her cheek down to press against the girl's head.

_A very strange feeling swept over her, strong enough to make her open her eyes to search out the source. _

A man was standing at the edge of the canal and was looking up at her with such an expression of yearning that she was taken aback. Unconsciously, she held the girl a bit tighter, and her eyes flicked to the others to make sure they were safe and close. He strode forward up the gentle rise of the embankment straight toward her, shoulder-length black hair blowing back from his strong face. When he was just a few feet away he stopped, silent.

"_What do you want, stranger?" Meri asked, no longer frightened. His deep-blue eyes were kind, and now that he was closer, she felt oddly safe. There was no threat in this man._

"_I do not have an answer to that question, but I think that I may find it with you, Meridian Chasewell," he answered. _

She didn't understand â€“ surely she would have remembered meeting him before. She started to shake her head, to ask how he had known her name, but the little girl in her arms had twisted around and reached out to the man.

He stepped forward and stretched out his arms to take her from Meri, his eyes steady and reassuring as they held hers. The little girl threw her arms around his neck and snuggled into his broad chest, completely trusting of a total stranger.

"_Who are you?" Meri asked in a whisper._

A sad smile touched his lips before he answered simply, "Ahren Castledown."

It had seemed like the most natural thing in the world for them to gather up the children and walk back to the orphanage together. Meri was absolutely enchanted by him, dazed when he had pressed a kiss to her hand in parting.

Ahren had visited the orphanage nearly every day after that. He worked tirelessly around the big house, fixing small things and helping the women with the washing and cooking. He laughed with them and they fell under his spell as well, unable to resist his easy charm and sincere kindness. The children fell in love with him at once, and Meri had laughed until her sides hurt to see them throwing themselves at him in the yard, bowling him over until it was a thoroughly unfair 7-on-1 wrestling match.

It was the nights that she lived for, though, when he would return to knock softly on the window of her tiny bedroom after everyone else had gone to sleep. She would lose herself in his touch for hours, breathing in the scent of his body and thinking to herself that this must be what Heaven was like.

That summer had been magical, but Meri's uneasy fear grew as slowly and steadily inside her as the new life that had begun there. The heat from the day hadn't yet faded when Ahren knocked softly on her window and she opened it.

His mouth was soft, but urgent as it sought hers, and it took all of her strength to turn her head. "Ahren, please. There's something I need to tell you."

His deep-blue eyes looked down at her and she took his hand from her waist to press it to her abdomen, smiling, her own eyes telling him her secret in an instant.

Confusion spread over his face and then fear â€“ not the reactions she had hoped for.

"_What's wrong? I thought you would be happy," she whispered, her own fear now mounting as the thought of him leaving her began to take hold._

"_I never thought... I didn't think it would be possible, " he breathed._

Meri covered her mouth, still trying to keep a hold on the panic that was beginning to spread. Ahren could feel the tension in her body and he reached up to take her arms and steady her. "It's okay, Meri, I'm just... there's something I need to tell you, as well."

_He stepped back and turned up the flame on her lamp. _

"_I should have told you sooner, but I couldn't bear to lose you. I only hope that you can forgive me."_

He closed his eyes, and at first, Meridian couldn't understand what was happening. His entire image was shimmering, rippling, fading away like... a glamour. A wild tousle of shining hair replaced black, and the fire shimmered over gold-tinged skin. She fell backwards in shock as he opened his golden eyes, and he darted forward, kneeling at her feet.

"_Meri, I never meant to deceive you with ill-intent. Once, I was of Heaven, but I could not return, and was instead sent back to live a mortal life. The blood of Heaven runs in my veins, but I have lost its grace and blessing in this life."_

_Meri was staggered. "You... you're a... an angel?" _

_He bowed his head to her. _

"_Then...this..." Her hand fluttered protectively over her belly. "What will it mean for our child?"_

Ahren shook his head. "I don't know, my love."

Meri struggled to control her breathing as she considered the implications. Her thoughts raced for some reference point, anything, and she grasped at the memory of the heroes of the Dark War, Jace Herondale and Clary Fairchild. Each had been altered with the blood of an angel by Valentine Morgenstern. Meri felt sick when she envisioned what the Clave would do with a half-Angel child. Warlocks would be summoned from the Spiral Labyrinth to study it, surely, and the monstrous Silent Brothers would be exceedingly interested. Her mind raced ahead to her child's gifts being harnessed for the Clave's use, a weapon to direct as they saw fit. Her child would never be free to live their life without interference from the Clave, she was certain of it.

Her hands shot forward and she clutched at Ahren's shirtfront, pulling him forward with a strength that surprised her. "We have to leave. I won't let the Clave have our baby."

Ahren started to protest but she was gripped by her fear and certainty, and her hands shook as she cut him off. "No. I want you to swear by the love you have for me that the Clave will never find us."

_What else could he do but agree? Meri would not hear any argument, and plans were laid to shake free of the Clave. A false letter was written from friends in Canada, far from Idris " could Meri come for a visit? _

_It was easy to lie to the two women she had shared a home with for two and a half years. She packed her trunk, surreptitiously laying the Chasewell family heirlooms in the bottom and covering them with clothes. She could sell a few to buy a fresh start. It was easy to leave the Glass City and travel to the border, meeting up with Ahren there, and then crossing into France to catch a flight across the ocean. _

The false letter had at least held one grain of truth â€“ she did have a friend in Canada. Seraphine Lark would help her go into hiding, she was sure of it.

She and Ahren picked a place north of the city that was nestled deep in the woods, just on the edge of a lake, far from any roads, and began building a small cottage there. Seraphine's help had been invaluable.

A week after arriving in the country, the cat-eared warlock had helped Meri stage a demon attack in they city, and then reported the sad news to the Clave that one of their own had been tragically lost in battle. Seraphine had taken an urn of ashes to the City of Glass, where it had been laid to rest in the Chasewell family crypt. She had never asked why her friend had needed this peculiar favour, and she never asked about the sad-eyed man who helped build the cottage.

Before the first snows had come, Meri and Ahren were snug in their new home, safe from the Clave, and her abdomen swelled with each passing week, making her eyes shine with joy.

But Ahren became increasingly withdrawn. He would lapse into silence for days, and vanish into the woods for long spells that worried Meri. He told her that he missed Alicante, that it had been easier for him to bear his loss of grace when he had still been surrounded by the children of Raziel.

"_But what about our child?" She had asked him, pressing his hand over her heart, "What about me?"_

_He never answered when she asked him that, and he sank deeper into a depression that she could not break. He stopped coming for meals, spending longer and longer in the woods or walking around the edge of the lake. _

_Meri refused to despair, certain that when their child was born, he would love her again. _

_It was deep in the heart of winter, when the trees were so frozen that she would hear their limbs crack under the weight of ice some nights, that she woke from a troubled sleep. A fire burned low in the grate, and Ahren lay on the couch, hand trailing down to the floor.

"_Ahren?" she called, tying her robe over her swollen belly._

His eyes fluttered and her heart lurched with relief, her unspoken fear loosening it's hold.

"_I'm so sorry, Meri," he whispered in the dying light. "I've done everything wrong."_

"_No, no you haven't," she said desperately as she knelt at his side, pressing a finger to his lips to hold back his words. She touched her hand to her belly. "This isn't wrong, Ahren."_

_His head slumped forward, and she watched as his appearance rippled as it had on that fateful summer's eve. An angel laid on the couch in

his place, weeping._

"_I've loved mortals for so long, but I never really understood them. Their hearts were so fragile, and still they raced to give them away. But my heart was never mine to give. I thought..." he gasped and clutched at his chest, hand spasming, pain in his eyes._

"_My Meri... I cannot live without the light of Heaven, though I have tried. You were... the best of me... Please forgive me." His eyes pleaded with her and tears ran down both of their faces. She threw herself across his chest and sobbed, her fingers twisting into his hair to hold on to more of him, as if she could will him to stay.

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She pulled back, tear-streaked face shining, and she pressed her lips to his, desperately seeking a spark of their love, but his lips did not respond to hers. His last breath escaped and he passed from the mortal life than he had been given to atone for his sin.

_Meridian sobbed and clutched at his shoulders, clinging to his body as she shook her head in denial. He was gone. _

She felt the baby kick inside her, perhaps sensing its mother's distress, and she rocked back, running her hands soothingly over her belly.

"_I'll never let anything hurt you, baby. I'll keep you safe."_

Sera exhaled shakily, watching Rayce across from her in the armchair. Tears sparkled in his eyes but did not fall. She sniffed and cleared her throat, her emotions getting the better of her for a change.

"So now you know what I am. My mother kept me away from everyone, and kept everyone away from me. I had never left the lake before she died. But she couldn't keep my dreams out."

Rayce shifted, readjusting to a more comfortable position. He thought of the similarities in their upbringings, protected by their mothers, but he found himself deeply grateful to have had Zeke, Arynessa, and Baelerithon. How much lonelier would he have been without them? Could he have survived as Sera had?

Sera continued, "I started dreaming about you almost from the start, though I didn't know anything about you back then. I was 11 when it happened â€“ a dream with extraordinary clarity. A gathering of the Fey, a tournament of champions, and a small Faerie knight dressed head-to-toe in black leather wielding a double-bladed staff. When our eyes met, it was like you saw me. And I saw you too, Rayce. I felt a bone-deep connection grow that night without knowing why.

"The years continued to pass and I got better and better with my gift. I tried to see you. I know now that the magic of the land under the hill prevents me from looking in, but wherever you were, you were acting like a focus for my sight. It was like looking through a telescope â€“ I could only see what was right there. And all the while, this heavy sense of duty lay across my dreams. I was 16 the first time I saw your mother killed, and what happened to you after. That's when I finally understood. I needed to use my gift to save you from that end.

"I was still trapped with my mother, though. It wasn't long after that I saw my own mother's death — a fall from an embankment, an accident while she was out gathering firewood. I could have warned her, watched for signs that the day was near and then kept her inside, but I didn't." Sera's voice had dropped to a whisper.

"I let her die, Rayce. There was no way she was ever going to let me go." Her shoulders were shaking now, and Rayce stood quickly. He went to the edge of the bed and laid back carefully next to her, curling his right arm around her hesitantly, unsure if he was welcome to intrude on her sorrow. Sera buried her face in his chest and a curtain of chocolate-coloured hair fell forward to hide her face. He said nothing, just held her until she stilled and her breathing evened.

She pulled back and scrubbed the back of her hand across both cheeks. "God, I'm so sorry. I really didn't want to fall apart like that," she paused and then hiccuped. "I'm starving."

Rayce rose from the bed as Sera swung her legs over the other side. She stood up, sheet still wrapped around her body, and she gave him a meaningful stare. He swiftly turned around to look out the window where the sun had risen further in the sky. Runners dotted the pathway by the water far below. He studied them while he waited for Sera to finish dressing, trying very hard not to see her reflected silhouette in the glass.

"Alright, I'm decent," she said, opening the bedroom door and heading through toward the kitchen. Rayce exhaled slowly.

Seraphine was still awake, newspaper discarded. She was watching a video on a clear glass tablet and frowning, but looked up when they entered.

"You owe me a new duvet, little miss I-forgot-how-to-work-the-washing-machine."

Sera laughed and went to the hall closet, returning with an identical duvet in a clear plastic bag. "I kind of thought I would, so I picked this up just in case."

"Hrmph. If you're quite finished in my bedroom, it's past time for me to get some sleep. I get the feeling I'm going to be busy later." She excused herself and they heard the bedroom door close softly down the hall.

Sera opened the fridge, pulling out an assortment of things while Rayce watched with interest.

"May I ask about the rune thing?" He ventured as she picked out a pair of frying pans from one of the cupboards.

"Right. The rune thing." She turned on the stove element under the larger pan. "Are you familiar with a Shadowhunter named Clary Herondale?"

"Yes, of course. My aunt. Baelerithon has told me the stories of the time before the Dark War when she first learned of her abilities."

"Good. That makes it easier. Like her, I can boost the potency of some runes, although that seems to come easier to me. I blame it on my Heavenly constitution," she snickered, laying strips of meat into the pan. "But unlike her, I have never needed a stele to lay runes."

Rayce's eyebrows shot up. "Why not?"

"Have you ever seen an angel grab a stele out of their pants pocket? In fact, do angels even wear pants? The language of Heaven is in my blood, and it's as natural to me as your _shifting_."

"But you don't have any scars. I, um, couldn't help noticing."

She lifted an eyebrow as her lips twisted up. "I'm sure you could have." The meat in the pan started sizzling and she poked at it with a fork, separating the slices, and when she was satisfied, she started grating a bit of cheddar cheese.

"Did you know that steles and seraph blades are both made out of adamas?" she asked, leaning over to turn on the heat under the smaller pan.

"Yes, of course, every Shadowhunter knows that..." he trailed off, wondering what sort of trap he was falling in to.

"Then why would you be surprised that runes _carved_ into your flesh with tiny seraph blades would leave scars? I don't use a stele, so I don't end up with the scars." She started dicing up a hunk of spinach leaves. "You'll notice that neither the _mendelin_, nor the _amissio_ and _iratzes_ that I put on you last night left any scars."

"When did you put a _mendelin_ on me?" He asked, thinking back.

"Before we stole the jet ski. You had to wonder why the Mundanes couldn't see us. Just a brush on your forearm â€“ you didn't even notice."

He shook his head as she cracked eggs into a bowl and whisked them vigorously. She added in the cheese and spinach and then dropped a dollop of butter in the pan. It was melting when Rayce thought of another question.

"Why do you glamour yourself, Sera? Is it just so that people can think straight when they're talking to you?"

Her smile froze for a moment as she poured the egg mixture into the pan, her back to him. "Yep. You got it." The kitchen was filled with the smell of whatever sort of meat was frying, and now the aromas of cooking eggs, cheddar, and spinach wafted up. Rayce had no right to be hungry again already, but he felt his stomach growl.

"Hungry?"

The slightly pointed tips of his ears flushed red and he looked down. "I've eaten."

"Mmm hmm," she murmured knowingly.

Sera had soon plated a pair of omelets and added a generous side of maple-flavoured bacon, setting a plate down in front of Rayce before going to the fridge to pour them some orange juice.

"This looks amazing," he complimented her.

"The good news is that it tastes amazing, too."

She sat down and cut a piece of the omelet off with her fork. She sighed deeply when she popped it in her mouth and relaxed backwards into the bar stool.

Rayce polished off the omelet in record time and then eyed the meat carefully. "What is this?"

Sera looked shocked. "It's bacon. Food of the gods."

He looked thoughtful. Bacon. He would do it, for Zeke. He took a cautious bite and felt his eyes widen before stuffing the rest of the piece in his mouth. Oh, Zeke. I never understood what you gave up to live with us. I'm so sorry.

They polished off what was left of the bacon and then Rayce rose to clear away the dishes. Sera watched him curiously. Well, that's a bonus.

While he was washing their plates, he looked up at her, sleeves rolled up neatly to stay dry. "So what do we do now?"

"That's really up to you."

"You can't... see... what we're supposed to do next?"

Sera shook her head. "Don't think about it like that, Rayce. Everyone has a choice. Free will. I'll use my gifts to help you in any way that I can, but I won't determine your path for you."

He thought about that as he scrubbed the bacon pan. What did he want?

"My family. Zeke, Arynessa, and Baelerithon. I have to know what happened to them. Can you... look... for them?" He turned the pan over into the drying rack.

"No. Without you in the Courts to give me a way in, I can't see what's happening there. But I can still find out." She pushed back her bar stool and stood.

"How?"

"I have friends in low places and a lot of money with which to bribe them. If I leave now I can probably be back before dark."

"You mean we can be back before dark, right?" He folded his arms across his chest.

"No, I definitely meant I. I invested a lot of time and effort into getting you away from the Courts and into hiding, and I'm not

going to expose you to the seediest people I know who _literally_ sell information for a living. You'll stay here. Seraphine is really quite lovely when she's had some sleep."

Rayce couldn't argue with her logic. Sera swept her hand at the bookcases set against the wall of the sitting room. "She also has excellent taste in books. Help yourself."

She pulled on the black boots from the night before over her jeans and Rayce plucked up her jacket, holding it out for her to slip into. She shook her brown hair out over the collar and tucked her keys into an inside pocket of the coat with a small smile on her lips.

"I'll see what I can find out. Don't worry if I'm late getting back" I'm pretty good at taking care of myself." She pulled the door open and stepped out into the hall, pulling it closed behind her.

Rayce turned the lock and the leaned his forehead against the door.

I will worry.

10. Chapter 9

** 9 **

Alicante â€“ July 2033

Alec Lightwood leaned back in his desk chair and stretched his hands over his head, yawning widely as the muscles in his shoulders protested. Almost done writing. He looked at the clock ticking away on his desk and winced; Magnus wasn't going to be happy.

He leaned back over the papers scattered across the wide expanse of the Consul's desk and sighed, lamenting the unnecessarily formal language required to write amendments to the bill he was trying to get through the Council. Tomorrow would be a long day of debate in the Council chambers as he pushed for ratification. He had been so enthusiastic when he had won the Consul election nearly ten years ago after Jia Penhallow had stepped down. Had had thought he would be able to accomplish so much more with the Shadowhunter-Downworlder alliance that had consumed his life following the Dark War.

Alec and Magnus had spent years travelling all over the world, sometimes bringing Max and Rafe with them, sometimes leaving them with Jace and Clary when they were home. Endless meetings with the world's most prominent Downworlders had culminated in a global network of communication, and in the winter of 2022 he had finally brought their vision to life: the New York Compact had been voted into Clave law to allow Downworlders to hold permanent and recognized positions with local Institutes. They would work hand-in-hand with Shadowhunters across the globe not as hired-help, but as partners. It was an extension of what had begun in Idris with awarding Council seats to representatives for each of the types of Downworlders, and a huge step forward for equality and equity in the Shadow world. It hadn't been long after the signing that his name had started being whispered as a candidate for Consul, as Jia had already made her intentions known.

His only regret was that he hadn't been able to find any way to convince the Clave to accept the Compact with a provision for the Fey. The damage done by Sebastian Morgenstern and the Seelie Queen seemed irreparable; the Shadowhunters refused to recognize the Faeries as anything but labourers now.

The restorations to Alicante and the Institutes attacked by the Endarkened had been completed years ago, but the work done by the Unseelie was absolutely incredible. The Glass City had never looked so beautiful, and it had quickly become the fashion to hire Unseelie artisans to update some of the old family manors, both in the city and the surrounding countryside. The Unseelie had accepted the contracts grudgingly, but they had had few other options for income â€“ the Cold Peace had seen to that. Strictly speaking, even the Shadowhunters should not have been able to engage their services, but the law had been skirted by sending permit requests through the Clave. And so grand additions and new facades had begun to sweep across the city of the Nephilim, scouring away fading beauty to replace it with the ethereal wonders of the Unseelie.

"Be it... further... resolved... that..." Alec huffed under his breath as he wrote, hand cramping from the long night. He didn't see or hear the silent shadow detach itself from the corner.

An iron-hard arm whipped under Alec's left arm and across his throat, yanking him backwards as his windpipe closed, and a black-gloved hand clamped down over his right, crushing it into his chest. Panic shot through Alec and he fought to break the hold, trying to shove back his chair to free his legs from under the desk, but he was trapped.

Spots appeared in his vision as a voice hissed in his ear, "That shirt with your complexion? How did you get out of the house this morning?" His attacker released his arms and Alec coughed violently, black hair falling into his eyes.

"Jace. You bastard." He rubbed at his neck ruefully.

"I've spent enough time telling you that your security is terrible, so I figured I should just show you. I know I look fabulous in white, but I'm not ready to go to your funeral yet, Alec." Jace came around and jumped up to sit on the Consul's desk, legs swinging carelessly.

"And I've told you that you're overreacting. As usual. Who's surprised?" Alec tried to edge the page he had been working on from under Jace, but his parabatai refused to budge.

"Everett Whitelock is more dangerous than you think. I don't know how often you get out of your wooden cage, but if you took the time to listen at doors and windows, you wouldn't feel so confident," Jace's expression was serious, his eyes darkening with concern. "I'm serious, Alec. You're going to need to do something about him."

Alec threw up his hands. "What do you want me to do? Make it illegal to hate the Consul? It's a democracy, Jace. He's always hated what I'm doing to change Clave law; I already know that. He's always going to think it's disgusting that I'm married to a warlock, a male_warlock, and that we have a mixed family; I've already heard that.

He's a bigot. I'm not going to give him power over me by stooping to his level, Jace, and I won't let one voice shout down all the others who support me."

"And if it wasn't just one voice, Alec?" Jace locked his eyes on Alec and reached over to grip his parabatai's shoulder. "If I told you that Everett was gaining in support to throw you out of office?"

Alec shook his head. "He wouldn't dare. The majority of the city is behind me, and that's all I need. A few bad apples won't spoil this bunch."

Jace looked down and stroked a scarred hand across the top of the wooden desk, slender pianist's fingers strong even after all these years. "I imagine that another Consul sat at this same desk and dismissed warnings about the Circle, Alec."

Alec said nothing, Jace's words sinking in at last. Maybe there was something to what he was saying. Jace could see that he was finally getting through and pressed his advantage.

"At least promise me that you'll accept some guards. I know that Cinder Whitescar and her parabatai Ria Ravenwood are in the city, and Cinder's probably bored out of her mind. I wish she'd listened to me when I told her she would have done well at the Scholomance, but there was no way she was going to give up bonding with Ria. We really need to get rid of that rule..."

Alec nodded. "I know, but I can't deal with that right now. Send Cinder and Ria over and I'll talk to them. As long as they can be... discreet. I'd prefer not to have word getting around that I'm afraid to sit in my own office."

Jace waved his hand dismissively. "With me creeping around, you should be very afraid."

"When did you get back? I thought you were teaching for the summer semester." Alec made another attempt to retrieve the page of amendments, but was brought up short by Jace's sheepish grin.

"I've been asked to, ah, take a sabbatical again."

Alec cocked his head and let a grin spread across his face. "Oh? Should I even ask what this one is for?" Jace had been teaching semesters on and off at the Scholomance for years, a highly-prized instructor who was second to none for strategy and advanced training techniques... but he came at the cost of his eccentricities. Every few years they would pile up too deep and the Headmaster would witheringly send Jace on another 'sabbatical'.

"Honestly, I really think it was unfair. I was updating the field manual for attack formations. I mean, they've all got ridiculous names anyway, don't they?" Jace jumped up, his boots grinding into the papers. Alec sighed as his parabatai continued.

"There's this one called the 'Stooping Falcon', for an attack from above," Jace leapt up explosively to demonstrate, his head almost brushing the ceiling as he whirled in midair and unsheathed two blades from his waist, driving downward with great force and sinking

them into the hardwood up to the hilts. Alec winced, and then leaned forward as Jace rolled forward out of sight, presumably pressed against the front of the desk. He stood to peer over, and Jace snapped forward like a striking snake.

"See? I call that one the Stealth Viper," His voice was filled with energy and Alec had half a second to snatch his work from the desk before Jace was sitting on it again.

"The Headmaster drew the line when I wrote in a particularly dangerous manoeuvre called the Rampaging Duck. He seemed to think I was making a joke, but I assure you, I was utterly sincere. It's absolutely deadly, but he wasn't interested in listening to my explanation." Jace sighed heavily. "Now there's a whole new crop of Centurions who will never be able to inspire terror in a large group of enemies at once."

Alec hid his smile. "So now you're back indefinitely?"

"For a while, I'm sure. Clary came back from Wangel Island when I told her, and of course we had been home for all of five minutes before your nephew Hunter was leaning on the bell looking for Aspen." His eyes softened when he mentioned his daughter. "If Clary and I are going to be in Idris for a while, I think it might be time for those two to finally complete the parabatai ceremony. The Angel knows they're ready."

They shared a grin, remembering their own ceremony 30 years earlier. Knowing that their families would be knit even more closely together with a new generation of parabatai made them flush with happiness.

"How's Clary holding up?" Alec asked softly. Luke had passed away from a heart attack in May, and it had been a difficult time for her and Jocelyn. When everything had settled, Clary had left for another trip to Wrangel Island to work with Helen Blackthorn and Aline Penhallow. Her gift with runes and the couple's long study of the world's wards were a passion project that had grown a strong bond between the three, and Alec couldn't think of a better place for Clary to get some distance and heal after Luke's death.

"She's better, I think, but still working on it. I think studying the wards is good for her â€“ it helps keep her mind occupied and I know she loves it. Why else would she have spent so much time on that frozen rock at the edge of nowhere in the last three years?"

"Neither one of you misses running the New York Institute?" Alec asked.

"No way. I thought that it was the right thing for us, and maybe it was at the time... but we both just had so much more to offer. We can't all turn into paper pushers like you." He shot an elastic at Alec. "You're so boring now. Do you have any idea what it's like to be bonded to a talking head? Where's the _action_?" He collapsed melodramatically onto his back across the desk and flung his arm over his face, paperclip basket and stapler tumbling to the floor.

Alec narrowed his eyes at Jace, "Better a talking head than a blathering ass. And I know where you're getting your _action_ now,

and in my official capacity as Chief Talking Head, I should be telling you to stay away from Brocelind Forest."

Jace peeked out from under the crook of his elbow, eyes widened innocently. "Brocelind Forest? Never heard of it. Is it nice this time of year?"

Alec shoved Jace hard with both hands, sending him rolling off the desk, though Jace managed to twist at the last minute and land a crouch. Alec sighed. Almost.

"I wouldn't know if it's nice at this time of year because Shadowhunters aren't supposed to be there. I don't know what you're after, but keep your nose clean. Do you know what kind of damage it would do if the Clave found out that my own parabatai was off doing the Angel knows what behind my back? Don't do that to me, Jace."

Jace looked abashed and stood up slowly.

"You're right. I'm an idiot. How can I ever make up for my idiocy?"

"You can look at these and tell me what you see," Alec answered, opening his top drawer and pulling out a few pages of images clipped together. Jace took the proffered pages and looked at what appeared to be screen stills from a video.

The first image showed a tall, white-haired man facing down a woman who's face was blurred and several indistinct shadows, a doubled-bladed staff held in his hands. The next still showed him with the ends of his staff entangled by whips wielded by the shadowy figures. But it was the third image that rocked Jace. It was a much closer shot of the man's face looking up at the camera from the sidewalk. Slightly pointed ears were visible through his nearly shoulder-length white hair, and the lines of his face made Jace's heart clench and his breath hissed in, "Sebastian."

"I'm glad you see it too, I was worried that I was just jumping at shadows. I think it's safe to say that it's not Sebastian, seeing as you and Clary laid his ashes to rest at Lake Lyn. This video was forwarded to me by the Toronto Institute a few hours ago after they were alerted that it was posted online, and I've watched it several times. You can catch sight of Marks on this mystery man — he is blood of the Nephilim. But the tips of his ears... part-Faerie? He reminds me of Mark Blackthorn. If there's trouble with the Fey in Toronto, it might be worth dispatching a couple of Centurions to look into it. What do you think?"

Jace was gripping the pages in his shaking hands. "I think I need to see that video."

Sera's black Tesla M pulled into the G Ross Lord Dam and Reservoir parking lot and she glided to a stop. The sun was already climbing toward mid-morning above, and although part of her wished it was nighttime to provide cover, she was mostly glad that it was still daylight. She always had fewer problems coming down here when the sun was up.

She pulled a black leather pack out of the passenger seat, locked the

car behind her and then started walking out toward the bridge. Power line towers stood in the water, a silent reminder that Mundanes would not be stopped by the land around them. She left the path and hiked down under the bridge, edging away from where the water ran under to keep her boots dry.

The graffiti on the underside of the bridge was impressive at first sight, but she had been here many times now and barely spared a glance at the tags. She quickly found the spiraling black lines of her alarm rune disguised by the spray paint and she pressed her hand to it, sending a flare through it to reignite the dormant Mark. Otherios would come. He was too greedy not to.

She leaned back against the wall and put up the sole of one boot behind her, rocking a bit with impatience. Otherios was an old troll who had been here for well over 50 years. He and his kind could often be found under bridges like these, and it seemed like the more dank and derelict the setting was, the higher the real estate value of the location. If the Mundanes were complaining about skyrocketing housing prices in the GTA, they would faint to find out about the underpass and bridge market — it was atrocious. But that meant that Otherios was always ready to make a deal, and Sera was never short on cash for him.

The troll had been serving as her go-between with Kaelie Whitewillow, since he had equal access to the Faerie and Mundane worlds, and stood guard over one of the smaller entrances that were open to all Fey. She had been able to just barely catch a glimpse of his location in her dreams when she had been searching for a way to get a message inside, his proximity to the land under the hill only partially shielding him. She had found him last year, and once he had been convinced that she wasn't there to arrest him but instead to heap great sums of cash on him, he had become very amenable indeed.

He had been the one to suggest the Queen's handmaiden as a possible point of contact, as she had been sent into the Mundane world as a messenger before, and could pass for one again if needed. Sera had laid her Mark on the outside of his dwelling, assuring him that she would never dare to intrude upon his home (but secretly very happy to avoid the horrendous stench that came from it), and told him that it would act like a doorbell that only she could use. He'd been suspicious at first, of course, but Sera hadn't given him any reason to doubt her yet, and their arrangement had proceeded smoothly.

Sera heard the sound of a concrete slab dragging over stone to her left and she saw the dark hole opening in the ground near the water. She started breathing shallowly through her mouth.

Otherios squeezed his bulk out of the hatch and then straightened, looking over to see Sera standing seemingly unarmed (boot knives never really counted, did they?) at a safe distance from his home. He gave himself a satisfied nod and then hitched up the absolutely filthy wrap around his waist, which might have once been a towel, but was now utterly unrecognizable. It wasn't a good look for him, with his grey-green slimy skin and bulbous face. His belly sagged over the towel and threatened to knock the garment free entirely. Sera shuddered inwardly but kept her face smooth as he called out in his gravelly voice.

"You again? I did my bit for you yesterday morning. Gotcha the

message from Kaelie, didn't I?" His voice dropped to a mutter and Sera pretended not to hear the part where he complained about being a hard-working troll who needed days off just like everyone else.

"You did, and I thank you for that. I need some information from the Seelie Court -" Otherios cut her off, waving his hands.

"No. No. And one more no. Something happened in there last night. I had a shadowy bastard come up here and tell me lock the entrance, that no one was allowed in or out until I heard otherwise. Gotta go around to the bigger gates. Telling me my business like I haven't been protecting this spot for half a century. Phaw," he spat a gob of tobacco-coloured spit into the water.

Sera was familiar with his haggling, and knew he was just trying to raise the price. Although she could afford it, it was the principle of the thing. She shook her head, "I'm not asking to go in myself, Otherios, I just need you to ask a few questions, get a few answers and then come back. That's all."

He snorted. "And what if someone tries to go in or out while I'm gone? That's a dereliction of duty, right there. You wouldn't have me sell my honour so cheaply, would you?"

"I'd never ask you to sell your honour cheaply, Otherios. I'm telling you to sell it expensively. I'll tell you what I'll stand guard while you're gone. No one will get in or out." She crossed her arms over her breasts and adopted a threatening posture.

He thought about it for a moment. "Twenty thousand," he said.

It was Sera's turn to snort. "You're getting a free guard to do your job while you're gone. It's five and not a dollar more."

She could see him itching. Five thousand was still a hell of a payday for him.

"Why don't you tell me what you want, first?" He was stalling, that greedy bastard.

"I want to know what happened to three specific individuals during whatever was going on last night." She feigned nonchalance.

"Which three?"

When Sera told him, he burst out laughing. "Oh yes, five thousand alright. Each. This'll mean getting right into the Court for answers."

She paused, pretending to think it over. To be fair, it was still cheaper than she had thought it would be. She had twenty-five thousand in cash just in her pack, tucked in with some protein bars, but he didn't need to know that. Or about the protein bars.

"Fine, but all three. It'll be five thousand flat if you don't get all of them."

His mouth split open to reveal the yellow and black stubs of teeth worn down almost to his gums, probably intending it as a smile.

"Deal."

Otherios waded out into the water until his sagging paunch had completely slipped under the surface, and then he simply vanished. Sera backed up onto the steep hill that led back up to the pathway, choosing the small patch of shade that would soon vanish. She would move to the other side when that happened. Laying back in the grass, she shrugged out of her jacket as the heat crept upward and she sighed. This was going to be a long day.

It was a long day, mostly filled with thoughts of Rayce. She'd flipped through the pages of the fat notebook she kept inside her jacket at all times, looking for anything that might help. She had the Mnemosyne rune to keep her from forgetting her dreams, but sometimes it was easier to find patterns when she could write down certain bits of what she saw. It was probably the world's most horrifying dream diary.

How many times had Rayce died in these pages? And her? So many outcomes from so many decisions made different ways. She was tempted to tear out some of the pages that shouldn't be able to happen now, but she always worried about the circular nature of some of her visions. Even if it didn't happen now, sometimes fate could return it to the mix for another shot later.

Darkness fell and she tucked the notebook back into her jacket, not wanting to use her witchlight and draw attention to herself. She hunched down against the concrete arch, zipped up her jacket, and continued to wait.

Movement in the grass on the other side of the water caught her eye and she covered her wrist with one hand, forcing her gift to blaze a much more powerful mendelin rune than other Shadowhunters could create. It wouldn't matter if they had the Sight or not, no eyes were going to be able to pierce her invisibility. She rose to a crouch cautiously, ready to move.

A tall Faerie knight was guiding a lovely pixie down the hill toward the water and Sera could overhear her complaining.

"This is absolutely disgusting, Daerion. Surely there was a better way to get to the coronation?"

The knight patted her blue-skinned arm. "Perhaps, beautiful Risellea, but there's still plenty of time to enjoy the luxuries of the Seelie Court. I've heard the hot spring cavern is positively... sinful." He turned a wickedly suggestive look at her and she shrieked with delight.

Coronation. Damn. She caught a flicker of a vision in her mind's eye, and it was enough to make her decision in a moment. She slipped the knives from her boots and moved down closer to the water.

"Is there someone over there?" The knight was peering at the seemingly empty air where Sera was now standing. Soundless runes would have been smarter, she berated herself.

The blade winked into sight a moment before it sank into his throat, and the second flashed out just the same for the pixie. Sera splashed into the water, soaked to her thighs, all thoughts of keeping her

boots dry gone from her mind. She hadn't enjoyed killing them, but if what she suspected was true, it might turn out to have been exceedingly necessary.

She searched through their clothing and his armour and turned up a scroll of peeled birch bark. It was an invitation that read more like a threat, instructing all Faerie gentry to return to the Seelie Court immediately for the coronation of a new monarch at the new moon.

Well, they didn't waste much time, did they? Sera thought, looking up at where only a sliver of the moon was hanging against the night sky. With a sour taste in her mouth, she pocketed the scrolls and then stripped the dead Faeries of their finery and armour to carry it up to the pathway above. Sera found a garbage can and took the bag, turning out the contents back into the bin and then she filled the sac with the stolen items. She tied it off and left it at the top of the hill where Otherios wouldn't see it when she left.

She hustled back down the hill to retrieve her knives from the now scantily-clad bodies, cleaning the blades in the water. _Whatever it takes_, she had promised herself years ago. Too late to turn back now.

Less than fifteen minutes later, Otherios swam up from the dark water and dragged himself out onto the shore where Sera was waiting.

He jabbed a finger at her accusingly. "No more favours for a while, Missy! The Court is stirred up like a hornet's nest right now. Or a wasp's. Whichever one can keep stinging and stinging."

"Then I hope it was worth the effort. What did you find out?"

That was when he caught sight of the dead Faeries on the other bank and his mouth gaped, flapping for air. "Wha- what- why?" He stammered.

Sera's voice was hard. "We had a deal. No one goes in our out. Now tell me what you dug up." His eyes bulged in horror, but he relented, words spilling out of his foul mouth.

After he finished telling her, she handed the entire pack to him, protein bars and all, and turned around. She left without saying anything else to the little troll, even when he called his thanks after her and said he hadn't been serious about not doing any more favours for her.

Sera snatched up the garbage bag on her way by and jogged back to her car.

_**Author's note: The physical description and names for the characters of Cinder Whitescar and Ria Ravenwood were submitted by Kira and were chosen to appear in this story with her permission.

>Aspen Herondale and Hunter Lightwood were submitted by Aspen Herondale and were chosen to appear in this story with her permission.

** 10**

An insistent buzzing broke through Seraphine's sleep, and she briefly weighed the relative merits of blasting her cellphone into tiny, silent pieces against the hassle of getting a new one. Reason prevailed and she pushed an arm out of her blanket burrito to grope around until she could snatch the bundle of annoyance and retreat back into the covers. When she saw the caller I.D. she considered sending it straight to voice mail, but given the circumstances of the previous night and her unusual house guest, she decided it might be prudent to answer.

"Lark," she sighed into the phone.

It was a short conversation out of necessity, and when she ended the call she pulled the pillow out from under her head and squashed it down over her face. This boy was an awful lot of trouble. She hoped he was worth it.

She wormed out of the nest of blankets and slogged her way to the washroom, grimaced at the impressive snarl her hair had achieved in such a short span of time, and then cranked the shower on.

When she was properly in order once more and dressed in a smart dark pantsuit she headed toward the kitchen in search of Sera and Rayce, fervently hoping that she wasn't about to walk in on them in a compromising position. Although I wouldn't mind so much with him, if I can be really honest with myself...

Rayce was curled up at one end of her couch, feet tucked under him, a blanket over his lap and a mug of tea on the side table. He was reading the well-worn book in front of him with a fierce intensity and didn't even notice her padding around the corner. She blinked and came to a stop. It was a rather endearingly domestic scene; she almost hated to intrude until she remembered why she was standing here instead laying wrapped up in her duvet.

"Good book?"

Rayce lifted his head slowly, eyes lingering on the page while he clearly finished the sentence he was reading before turning his enchanting green eyes on her. Good heavens, it's not fair.

"Oh, yes! Although, I'm torn between relief that there are still six more, and sadness that there are only six left." Sera tilted her head to the side questioningly and Rayce sheepishly lifted the cover of the book so that she could see. Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone.

She kept an absolutely straight face and cleared her throat. "Where's Sera?"

He placed a bookmark into the novel carefully and set it down on the coffee table. "She's gone to bribe her friends in low places to find out what's happened to my family."

Sera lifted an eyebrow in surprise. Interesting.

Rayce pushed the blanket back as he continued, "I didn't think you

would be awake for hours yet. Are you alright?"

"The Institute called to engage my services. It seems that someone uploaded a video of a mysterious Faerie warrior wielding a double-bladed staff against some blurry shadows in downtown Toronto last night. Now I need to go through the headache of wiping memories and laying down a tricky bit of magic to smooth over what people saw. You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?" She smiled innocently and then immediately felt guilty when his face fell. She rushed to continue, "But it's quite alright. I really only need a cat nap here and there."

A smile broke across Rayce's lips as he caught her pun. "Can I do anything for you before you leave? Or anything, really?"

"Bless you, dear, that's kind, but I had rather thought that I would do something for you before I left." Seraphine crossed to the bookcase in her sitting room and held her hand lightly over the third shelf, a pink aura pulsing faintly from her palm as the books there faded away to reveal a safe. She spun the dial expertly and then pulled out a white-gold arm bangle from within.

"Sera had me enchant this for you a few months ago, but I couldn't finish it until I had you in front of me," she explained.

The band was simple and seemingly unadorned, an ordinary cuff by the looks of it, designed to rest just above the bicep. Rayce pulled up the short sleeve of his loose black shirt to allow Seraphine to slip it into place.

"No, no, dear. You'll have to remove your shirt for this part. I need to tune it to you."

"Tune it to me? What does it do?" Rayce asked, reaching down for the hem of his shirt to pull it up and off in one smooth motion.

"It'll block any attempts at tracking you. As much as I'm delighted to have you as a guest, I don't think you're planning on staying in here forever." Seraphine reminded herself to keep breathing, then leaned forward and slid the bangle into place.

The broad expanse of Rayce's muscled chest was at eye-level for the diminutive warlock, and she reached up to place one hand over his heart and the other on his flat stomach, focusing her power to complete the spell, hands sparkling pink. Her breathing evened and she stilled herself until she could just feel the strong beating of his heart and his steady breaths. His chest was warm, and she could see the faint white lines of rune scars.

They stood unmoving for some time, and then Seraphine shifted slightly, not breaking contact, and slipped around behind Rayce to relocate her hands to his shoulder blades. Her breath trailed down his spine as her palms continued to glow faintly, and she trailed her fingers down until her hands were resting lightly on his waist. She closed her eyes and waited.

The pink light faded and Seraphine exhaled slowly, then removed her hands from Rayce. "It's done."

"Thank you, Seraphine," he said sincerely, "but I wonder if I might

ask why I had to take my shirt off?"

"You didn't. That was for me. Consider it a cucumber tax if it makes you feel better, but I have no regrets." She winked at him and was already in the front hall by the time Rayce had pulled his shirt back on indignantly, leaving his protests unvoiced. Cucumber tax, indeed!

She called out to him as she slipped into a pair of sensible heels, "Help yourself to whatever you'd like, enjoy the day on the balcony, but I wouldn't advise leaving if you can stand it. Even if you can't be tracked, you can still be seen. And Sera would be frantic if you were gone when she returned. If I'm lucky, I'll be back in the early evening."

Rayce turned the corner in time to lift a hand in farewell and see her cat's tail swish around the corner before she locked the door. Then he let his hand fall and stalked back to the couch, scowling and thinking violent thoughts about cucumbers.

He chose to take Seraphine's advice and carried his book out to the chairs on the balcony. It was a beautiful morning, the breeze still cool at this height, and felt instantly refreshed. The sky was almost perfectly clear, just a few wispy clouds stretched out across the horizon. The lake was calm below him, and he could already see many watercraft launched to take advantage of the lovely weather. He took a deep breath and sighed.

Rayce sat back and opened his book, but was soon distracted by the white birds wheeling over the water. He had no name for them, but just watching them made his heart swell with yearning. They were so free! He wondered what it would be like to fly across the sky like them, unfettered to the world and troubles below. He deliberately turned his chair to remove the birds from his line of sight and focused on the pages once more; he had a sneaking suspicion that he knew exactly what was under Quirrell's turban.

The sun was already beginning its final descent into the western horizon when Seraphine pushed open the door of her condo, relieved to find that the wisp of a ward that she had set on the door after leaving was unbroken. If Rayce had left, he would have needed to grow wings to do it.

The ruined duvet was neatly bundled near the door, and Seraphine poked her head into the guestroom to find that it had been made up once more. Only Rayce's staff and pack remained to show that he had even been in the room.

She turned the corner into the main living area and found him in much the same position as she had that morning, though he had definitely progressed in his reading, judging by the thickness of whichever book he was on now.

Rayce looked up and let a grin twist up the left side of his mouth. "Did you manage to Obliviate everyone who needed it?"

Seraphine burst out laughing, all the stress of her day gone in an instant. A Faerie prince making a Harry Potter reference was apparently exactly what she needed when she came home after a day like today.

"Yes, I did, thank you. And for the people I couldn't hunt down directly, I managed to lay down a lovely spell on the video file so that anyone who sees now it will think it's leaked footage from a movie that's shooting here in the city. It's quite a neat trick, I'd say."

He closed his book and walked through to the kitchen, opening the refrigerator door with an ease that made it seem as though he'd grown up surrounded by appliances. "I thought it would be nice if I had dinner ready for you and Sera when you came home, since you have both provided for me."

Seraphine paused thoughtfully. If I got that bangle back... he might have to stay here....

He set a large bowl on the counter top next to a stack of three plates and then lifted the lid off with a faint smile. Cucumber salad. Clever boy. He'd used a peeler to strip off long ribbons of cucumber into a heap, then tossed it with sliced strawberries, almond slivers, and basil. She had to admit, it looked pretty good, and she thought she could smell some of her favourite raspberry vinaigrette wafting up from the bowl.

She decided not to give him the satisfaction of seeing her flustered, and so simply helped herself to a large serving and settled into her bar stool as if she had this for dinner every night. "I trust you had an uneventful day, then?"

Rayce nodded. "It gave me a lot of time to think, though, so I'm afraid I might have a few more questions." He took a heap of the salad for himself and then returned the bowl to the fridge before joining Seraphine. "I was wondering why Sera covers up who she is with glamour runes. She's beautiful; why hide?"

Seraphine's fork slowed on the way to her mouth as she considered carefully how she should answer, surprised that he already knew about the glamour. "Has Sera told you anything about herself yet?"

"She told me about how her parents met and she was born, and about how her mother died."

The warlock nodded and speared another strawberry. "You must have picked up on how protective Sera's mother was," she paused for Rayce to nod. "And you got a sense of how devoted she was to Ahren?" Another nod. "Then you need to understand that Meridian clung to Sera with an unnatural attachment. That impossible gold and platinum hair, her shimmering complexion, and most of all, her startling golden eyes" Meridian looked at all of that and only saw the last piece of Ahren she had. She was so obsessed with the man she had lost that she let it cloud her sight for the daughter she still had. I'd say that Sera hides Heaven's touch on her with the hope that people will value who she is more than they value what she looks like.

"Quite aside from that, Sera was just a teenager when she left that cottage in the woods. It's not easy to get on with your life when you aren't even recognized as an adult, and Sera grew up in a hurry. She sold the last of the Chasewell heirlooms and bought a plane ticket to Las Vegas when she was 17, fulfilling a dream she had already had."

Seraphine stopped when she saw Rayce's puzzled expression at the unfamiliar city. "Sin City, a gambler's haven of decadence and wealth. Glamour gave her a new, older appearance and got her into the casinos where she would walk the floor and try to direct her gift to give her flashes — a winning toss, the number on a roulette wheel that would drop next. She started small, and got the hang of it soon enough.

"Las Vegas is filled with watchful cameras, though, and it became second-nature for Sera to change her appearance as often as she changed hotels. She has at least a dozen different identities that I know about, and she's invested plenty of her wealth to create safe-houses that are off the grid all over the world. You have to understand how unbelievably focused she has been since her mother died. I've never seen anyone like her in the 164 years that I've been walking this earth."

Seraphine took a moment to enjoy a bit more of the salad, savouring how light it tasted. She reluctantly made a mental note to try this again when Rayce wasn't around.

Rayce looked conflicted. "She... uses her gift to cheat Mundanes? That seems dishonourable."

"She's not cheating Mundanes, she's making chance work in her favour. She gets it wrong sometimes, or something happens to alter the result. She's been Lady Luck for a thousand nights, and when she's there, the house needs to try its hand at losing for a change. I applaud her. Las Vegas has an impressive Institute that works overtime shutting down an incredible amount of demonic cheating and naughty warlocks looking to make a quick buck. Her gift gives her a measure of protection by giving her a warning if she's about to misstep, but it's always a risk. The vampires who run that city are not forgiving."

"I do not think I would like this City of Sin, Seraphine. It sounds like a den of vice."

"You know, love, I think that may have been the city motto for a while." She leaned in. "What we should be discussing is what you're going to do with the information that Sera buys with her ill-begotten fortune."

Rayce spread his hands. "If my family lives, I must do anything I can to protect them. Zeke gave up everything to get me away safely; how could I leave him to whatever fate awaits?"

"Have you considered that it would be a poor repayment of that sacrifice if you were to return and be captured or killed anyway?"

"Of course I have," Rayce said impatiently. "But I intend on returning with a plan. There wasn't enough time before, but this time I'll be ready."

Seraphine rose and pushed away her empty plate.

"For your sake, I hope you are."

It was nearing midnight when Sera's keys rattled in the front door and Rayce shook awake, *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince* falling from his lap. He'd been very interested to read about another half-blood prince.

"Sera!" He threw off the blanket and rushed over to her, intending to sweep her into his arms with relief, but realized at the last minute that it might not be appropriate. He drew up short as she kicked off her boots and dropped a black plastic bag next to the bundled-up duvet. She looked distracted, but it melted away into a smile when she turned her grey eyes up to take in his worried expression.

"I *did* tell you not to worry if I got back late."

"I failed miserably, then. Let me go wake Seraphine, she wanted to be up when you got home, but she gave up about an hour ago." Rayce turned toward the master bedroom, but Sera hooked the collar of his shirt and pulled him back.

"Let me do it; she'll have a panic attack if it's *you* that sees her with her hair in curlers."

Ten minutes later Seraphine's curlers and cat ears were safely hidden under a nightcap and she was bundled up in a fluffy white robe with matching slippers, ready to host another late-night discussion.

She yawned widely. "I swear, I *will* get more than two hours of sleep eventually. I was kidding about the cat naps earlier."

They settled into the sitting room, Seraphine in the squashy armchair, Sera and Rayce on the couch. Sera took a deep breath.

"They're all alive," she began. "At least as far as I can tell. The Seelie Court is being held by one of the Unseelie Fey, Malchezed."

"Malchezed!" Rayce spat, eyes flashing angrily.

"You know him?" Sera asked.

"I know *of* him, would be more accurate. He was a steady presence at the parties and revels of the Seelie Court where I fought for the throne, always talking to different courtiers and whispering in the right ears. He's particularly close with one of the Unseelie King's advisers, Iarlath." Rayce looked furious at the Faerie's betrayal, but quieted so that Sera could continue.

"He's holding your brother prisoner, it seems. My source was unable to pin down exactly why, but it sounded like Baelerithon is expected to throw the support of the Seelie heirs behind Malchezed's bid for rule... or be killed."

"It would make sense. Bael is the Crown Prince - he can speak with the authority of the throne for the rest of us. If he gives his support, even nominally, to Malchezed, there will be a far lower chance of civil war to oppose the take-over. Even an honourless son of a goat like him wouldn't take much pleasure in ruling over a decimated Seelie Court."

Seraphine's cat ears twitched. "Son of a goat?"

"If you had seen him, you would understand."

Sera cleared her throat. "Goat-spawn or not, he has your brother, and your brother has Zeke. It sounds like Baelerithon asked that Zeke be spared as part of his assent to consider supporting the Unseelie assault. My spy reported that Zeke was badly injured during your escape, but that the prince is caring for his wounds and speeding his healing as best he can."

Tears welled up in Rayce's eyes and he felt his heart swell. Zeke was alive. He felt himself choking up with gratitude to his brother that whatever else had happened, the two of them were together and had each other. He touched Sera's knee. "And my sister?"

"That's the part that took so long. Otherios, my fat little troll informant, had to do a lot more walking than he had bargained for. He was able to find someone who remembered seeing her making a run toward something called the 'ley line terminus', " she paused for confirmation and Rayce nodded his understanding. "Malchezed seems pretty smart, and he ordered a census immediately after the Court was secured so that he would know who he had and who he was missing. Arynessa wasn't on that list.

"Otherios really outdid himself, either out of greed or sheer curiosity at that point â€“ the exits had been ordered sealed and the ley line terminus was shut down shortly after the attack. He dug up one of the technicians who manages the power flows and found out that there was one last transmission burst just before the lines went dark. He couldn't say for certain, but he said it looked like it was heading for the Rift."

Rayce's dazzling smile lit up. "The Rift? You're certain?"

"Maybe, unless there's a place called the Raft? Otherios can be hard to understand sometimes."

Rayce laughed out loud. "No, the Rift is perfect. It's what we call the cavern that holds a city that lies neither within the realm of Men nor Fey â€“ it's the backbone of nearly all of the illegal Faerie commerce and trade over the last decade. If you know of the Shadow Markets in the Mundane world, consider this to be the Fey's answer to them. But there's only one, and it's far more grand, accessible from all over the world because it's connected to the ley line network. It's a safe haven for Downworlders where the Nephilim cannot intrude. Seelie law rules there instead."

Seraphine's eyes had gone wide. "I know about the Rift. Why are you happy that your sister ended up there? It's filled with the very worst of Downworld. And the currency isn't always... monetary. I know for certain that the vampires charge in blood, and you can find that you run out of capital very suddenly, and violently!" She shuddered.

Rayce shook his head, still grinning knowingly. "You don't understand. Arynessa has many powerful connections in the Rift, she'll be well-protected and sheltered there. Malchezed cannot attack the Rift with his Unseelie forces â€“ the Downworlders there are too numerous and powerful. Quite aside from that, if he wants the Seelie

Court, he can't very well destroy its greatest source of income. Arynessa made the perfect move. She's safely out of his reach, but she also managed to place herself in a strong defensive position with allies around her." Rayce's eyes were filled with approval and admiration for his sister.

"I have to say," Sera admitted. "Otherios made the Rift sound like a bad place to be. I guess I was more worried than I should have been."

"Yes, very much so," Rayce replied.

Seraphine shifted on the armchair, leaning forward and curling her tail around her ankles. "So what does this mean for you, Rayce? What will you do?"

Before he could answer, Sera broke in. "There's something else. While I was waiting for Otherios to come back, two of the Faerie gentry came to use the entrance. They were carrying an order to return to the Court immediately for the Seelie coronation that's going to take place tomorrow night."

"_Tomorrow_ night?" Rayce looked frustrated.

"Yes, I don't think Malchezed wants to waste any time."

He slapped a fist into his palm. "Then we have to try to get Bael and Zeke out first. Arynessa is safe enough where she is."

A look of hesitation flashed across Sera's face, and Rayce saw it before she wrestled it back under control. "What is it?" he asked. "Did you see something else?"

She bit the inside of her lip and her eyebrows drew together worriedly. "Rayce, it's your decision. You have to be free to act. I can't tell you what to do."

"Sera, this is my family! Please, if you know anything else, I'm begging you to tell me." He dropped from the couch to his knees in front of her, taking her hands in his. "What if my choice is to ask you to tell me what to do? What of your visions then?"

Sera closed her eyes and took a deep breath, exhaling slowly.

"While I was listening to the Fey under Otherios' bridge, I had a flash, just a quick look at you and I at the edge of a lake. We were dressed in Faerie clothing, breathing hard, and you were clutching a battered, dull metal circle. I couldn't tell what it was made of, but it looked like junk."

Rayce's mouth fell open in surprise before it curved upward into a smile. He looked slightly pleased with himself.

"Junk?"

Sera nodded. "Certifiable junk."

"Then I think I know what to do, I just don't know how to do it yet."

It took another two hours of discussion before the three of them hammered out a plan, and Sera was exhausted by the time they had finished talking. Seraphine had nodded right off, and Rayce lifted her gently out of the armchair to carry her back to the master bedroom. He closed the door softly behind him and found Sera on the floor gathering up the poor sketches he had made of the Court and some of the tunnels around it. He winced a bit at seeing them.

"I'm sorry those were so terrible."

Sera looked up and shook her head. "It's fine. You're the one who's going to be leading anyway. I just have to stay with you, right?"

Rayce knelt down and closed his hand over hers, his eyes fixing on her earnestly. "I won't leave you, Sera. You've seen us outside; it's going to work."

Her features drew up in a pained expression. "No, it just means that it can work if we do everything right. I'm sure there's plenty of ways that it can go wrong, and I can't see any of them right now without you in the Court to tether my dreams." She shook her head. "I feel so blind right now."

He rose slowly, drawing her with him by her hand, and pulled her into his arms gently. She didn't pull away, and so he tilted his head down to rest against hers. "Sometimes you just need to trust in your faith and make the jump, Sera." He was thinking about jumping off the edge of a roof with her last night, how he hadn't hesitated, that the moment her hand had grasped his everything had felt right.

She didn't reply. She stood silently for a moment before stepping back, and he followed her as she walked to the freshly-made guest bedroom.

Seraphine was sleeping soundly in the master bedroom and Rayce immediately saw the problem. He stopped. "I can sleep on the couch."

Sera paused in the doorway and looked back over her shoulder. "You can, but you won't." She disappeared around the corner. "Come to bed, Rayce."

His heart pounded loudly, traitorously, in his chest, but he wasn't enough of an idiot to insist on sleeping on the couch. He slipped into the bedroom after her, already pulling his shirt over his head, his new bangle catching the light. Sera was standing at the bureau, taking off her watch and pulling out her earrings. He didn't know what to do, so he folded back the duvet and slid into bed.

Sera was facing away from him, moonlight kissing her skin as she shimmied out of her jeans. Socks followed, and Rayce's mind yelled at him to look away, imploring him to remember some shred of the manners that had been bred into him by Baelerithon over the years. She reached back to unhook her bra under her tank top and shrugged out of it, leaving her shirt in place. Rayce dared to breathe. Maybe he would live.

She took a deep breath and sat on the edge of the bed, dark hair swinging down to almost brush the sheets. She slid her right hand

over her left shoulder to the glamour rune there and hesitated, warring inwardly whether to renew or dispel it.

Sera sighed and her appearance rippled, her angelic colouring unmasked once more. She turned, pulling her legs up and under the covers, and rolled over onto her hip to face Rayce. He was breathing shallowly, and she reached over to press a finger to his lips.

"Please don't say anything," she whispered. She didn't think she could bear to hear him tell her she was beautiful. She wished he hadn't seen her true appearance this morning, but now she had to trust him, and pray that he would see her heart and not her face.

She laid down on her side and slid closer to him, reaching out tentatively to lay her hand on his chest and her head on his shoulder. She felt his left arm curl around her softly and she closed her eyes. He laid there quietly and she slowly felt the tension seep out of her body as she relaxed into his side and hooked her left leg over his. Rayce drew the duvet up with his right hand and then folded that arm over her as well.

He pretended not to feel the pair of hot tears that landed on his chest as she squeezed her eyes shut and sighed deeply.

End
file.